



PASSENGERS Voice

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GIVING AMTRAK FOOD FOR THOUGHT

(Reprinted from our online blog at railpassengers.org/blog)

We first told you in July about Amtrak's plans to expand its **Contemporary Dining food-service model** to all National Network trains east of the Mississippi, and shared with you then that we had been pushing Amtrak to improve the model ever since they introduced it last year on the Lake Shore and Capitol. Of all the suggestions and issues our staff and our members raised with them, Amtrak only addressed one -- the need for a hot dining option.

Since last year, we've been meeting informally with Amtrak leaders and executives to try to work out something better.

It appears Amtrak is simply barreling ahead with an offering that remains flawed and potentially threatens the attractiveness of the trains without substantively addressing the shortcomings we identified.

It's fair to say that despite the handcuffs on Amtrak (such as the

"Mica" provision that Food & Beverage at Amtrak must break even, or the **even-sillier notion that Amtrak must turn a profit**), our members believe they can do better when it comes to feeding passengers.



(Photo Credit: Carolyn Stagger Cokley)

Here's what we have asked for from day one:

- More hot choices
- Consideration for dietary needs such as kosher requirements, vegetarian, low-sodium/healthy, and common allergies
- Better presentation (no more dinner-in-a-box!)
- Better provisioning (diners should not run out of food in the first few hours of an overnight journey)
- Continue to allow Coach

passengers to buy meals in the diner if they choose

There have been suggestions made by Amtrak that new equipment was coming that would make it easier to address

these concerns. Likewise, a new food-service vendor competition was supposed to improve the food choices while helping Amtrak meet its legal mandate to break-even on food and beverage. New convection ovens were supposed to replace microwaves so that more food could be cooked simultaneously with

improved flavors.

Amtrak says it's making food-service changes to respond to customer demand. To an extent that IS true: there are many riders,

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Madi Butler



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This issue has news through September 13, 2019.
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Upcoming Regional Rail Passengers Association and State Passengers Association Member Meetings & Events

Saturday, September 28

- **RailPAC Annual Meeting - Fullerton, CA**

Monday, September 28

- **All Aboard Ohio Fall Meeting - Columbus, OH**

Saturday, October 5

- **Empire State Passengers Association Meeting - Schenectady, NY**

Please contact Bruce Becker (bbecker@narprail.org) to have a local, state or regional meeting added to the Rail Passengers calendar (print and online) of upcoming events!

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especially newer and younger riders, who want lighter fare and the ability to eat without worrying about fixed mealtimes.

We have heard from many passengers -- members and non-members alike -- who believe the food itself in the Contemporary offering is better-tasting than the food it replaced.

Wide agreement on individual food items really won't happen. Food is just too personal.

We can agree that tossing largely cold, processed food wrapped in plastic into a box and handing it over in a plastic bag is not exactly a welcoming message to passengers. Nor is the lack of place settings at dining-car tables, which is designed -- subtly, of course -- to discourage passengers from staying in the dining car with their boxed lunch. As for coach passengers, the message seems to be "hope you stopped at McDonald's before you got on board."

We expect better from a taxpayer-supported enterprise that supposedly serves the entire population.

After weeks of requests and back-and-forth with Amtrak and our members, **we've delivered a formal letter to a senior Amtrak executive** with responsibility for the customer experience. We've asked him for written on-the-record answers to specific questions, especially in light of the July announcement that the new service will hit the rails on October 1st.

Our questions to Amtrak:

- Are any elements of the Eastern trains dining plans open

to refinement before launch in October?

- How will the new dining cars -- purchased and approved with taxpayer dollars to serve as dining cars -- be utilized in this new service model?

- What plans exist to address shortfalls in items aboard the trains and options for those with special needs (kosher, vegetarian, allergies, etc.)?

- What is the status of food-service equipment upgrades that were contemplated to improve the taste and appearance of dining-car food?

- What are Amtrak's plans for dining changes on the Western trains, i.e., National Network trains such as the Empire Builder, California Zephyr, Southwest Chief, Coast Starlight and Sunset Limited?

House Appropriators made it clear early this summer that they heard us, and our members, as we raised our concerns to Congress about the wholesale changes taking place with very little input from those affected. House lawmakers wrote in June, "Amtrak has made changes to policies and procedures relating to charter trains, private cars, station agents, call centers, food and beverage service, and law enforcement, all of which have impacts on its ridership, employees, and communities.

Therefore, the Committee directs Amtrak to increase engagement with customers, employees, stakeholders, and the public on proposals to change operations and services, including providing an opportunity to comment on policies prior to finalizing decisions."

VIEW FROM THE HILL: RAIL PASSENGERS WORK WITH FEDS ON “PASSENGER BILL OF RIGHTS”

Following a hard-fought legal victory in the U.S. District Courts, Amtrak and FRA are—finally—able to work together to develop the metrics and standards for passenger rail service in the US. This document can be seen as a “passenger bill of rights,” ensuring the delivery of certain basic levels of quality of service.

As part of the development process, Amtrak and the Federal Railroad Administration asked Rail Passengers to sit down with them and provide feedback within the statutory guidelines. At the conclusion of a very good meeting the FRA asked us to produce a series of metrics and reportable figures that we believe will benefit passengers and the public; this input will be used to help inform the metrics and standards that are ultimately set forth.

At a meeting with USDOT, Rail Passengers gave a frank assessment of where we think Amtrak isn't providing enough transparency—such as fully allocated versus avoidable costs in its route performance statements—and where we think the company has essentially misunderstood what passengers value in its service—such as the necessity of a truly National Network, and the onboard Food & Beverage.

We were also able to come to genuine consensus with Amtrak on a number of key issues, particularly as it relates to On-Time Performance as an essential component of a

sustainable National Network. This is critical, because without reliable service, passengers will seek other modes and Amtrak won't be able to attract new riders.

The USDOT reps mentioned a number of times how impressed they were by the analytics Rail Passengers was able to provide, including the economic benefits figures produced by our IMPLAN-based model.

The positive reaction the USDOT had to our work is a testament to the strategy this association has pursued to upgrade our analytical capabilities. Given the number of meetings this Sec. 207 working group has had with groups hostile to passengers interests, it's also a testament to the value of keeping a cool head in a crisis—there's value in having a seat at the table.

You can read the written brief Rail Passengers submitted to the USDOT on our website at www.RailPassengers.org/PassengerRights.

CONGRESS, BACK FROM AUGUST RECESS, WORKS TO AVOID SHUTDOWN

Congress returned to Washington, D.C. after an August recess only to face a looming September 30th deadline to avoid a government shutdown. With three weeks remaining and only a handful of Fiscal Year 2020 budget bills passed, Congress has already settled on a short-term extension that would push the deadline to Thanksgiving.

“I like the Thanksgiving deadline just to try to create a sense of urgency,” said Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK) of the House Appropriations Committee. “But there's no risk of a government shutdown.”

With a two-month Continuing Resolution a seeming certainty, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation is pushing ahead with its work. While the funding levels are expected to compare favorably (see below), it remains unclear whether their policy riders Rail Passengers fought hard for this spring—declaring long-distance routes essential, requiring Amtrak to seek input from states and passengers before changing on-board services, bringing back certain station agents, and repairing the relationship between Amtrak and private car owners—will make it into the Senate bill. Please visit www.RailPassengers.org/Action to take part in our Senate campaign to get these critical policies enacted into law!

HOUSE FY2020 PASSENGER RAIL FUNDING

- Amtrak - National Network: \$1.4 billion
- Amtrak - NEC: \$750 million
- Consolidated Rail Infrastructure & Safety Grants: \$600 million
- Federal State Partnership for State of Good Repair: \$500 million
- Restoration & Enhancement Grants: \$20 million

PHOENIX PASSENGERS PREVAIL IN LIGHT-RAIL PROPOSITION

While concern was high over the future of Phoenix light rail in the weeks leading up to a ballot proposition that could have killed all future investment in passenger rail in the city, voters took to the ballot box in overwhelming numbers to support and expand the network.



PHX Light Rail (Photo Credit: Madi Butler)

Over 180,000 votes were cast, the highest-ever turnout for a ballot measure-only election, with the final margin coming out 2-to-1 in favor of passenger rail. This is the fourth time this century that Phoenix voters have needed to step up in a special election to vote for public transportation

“Welcome to the Phoenix of the future—where we invest in our transportation, our parks and our libraries, and where Phoenicians, not outside special interests, decide what’s best for our city,” said Mayor Kate Gallego. “And because YOU stepped up, Phoenix’s future looks brighter than ever. Light rail expansion is not stopping—not today, not tomorrow, not ever. We have and will continue to protect our rail because this is not about one route, this is about equity for our entire

community.”

Valley Metro Regional Public Transportation Authority issued a statement promising that work on the light rail extensions will continue, while promising to partner with local businesses to minimize impact from construction:

“Valley Metro will continue to partner with the community and help local businesses before and during the construction of current and future extensions. Related to the South Central Extension/ Downtown Hub, the business assistance program has started earlier than ever before and it has the largest budget allocated to technical, financial and marketing assistance programs than any other prior rail project in metro Phoenix.”

A special thank you to all Rail Passenger members in the Phoenix area who voted YES on rail at the ballot box—and encouraged their friends and family to make their voice heard. This victory wouldn’t be possible without their support, and the work of local organizations like All Aboard Arizona.

THE RAIL PASSENGERS ASSOCIATION NEEDS VOLUNTEERS!

Whether you’re looking to develop new expertise, add to your creative portfolio, or looking for a way to make a difference, RPA has dozens of immediate volunteer openings available. These are meaningful, ongoing roles you can use to jumpstart your professional life or contribute in a hands-on way to our work for more and better trains.



We need volunteers in the following administrative, communications, advocacy, and technology roles:

- Office Manager (based in Washington, DC)
- State Support Coordinators
- PR And Marketing Associates
- Graphic Design Associates
- Certified Citizen Advocates
- Data Entry Assistants (based in Washington, DC)
- Bloggers
- Email Marketing Associates
- Route Spokespeople
- Web Content Assistants

While these positions are unpaid, the results they produce are real. Apply by sending your resume and a cover letter by email to volunteer@narprail.org. Descriptions for each role can be found on the Volunteer Positions page on our website, as well as the flexible time commitment necessary (typically a maximum of ten hours a week). If you have previously sent in your resume, thank you – you are already being considered.

ALL ABOARD!

MADI WRAPS UP SUMMER BY RAIL 2019

Summer by Rail was a pivotal learning experience and I am very grateful for the time I have spent on this massive seasonal adventure. As I traversed over six thousand miles and twenty four cities over the course of fifty days, I learned new lessons in each destination.

On my trip, I saw first-hand how Amtrak's long distance routes, paired with regional public transit services bring people together in a myriad of ways. I was able to highlight diverse destinations during this summer, showing how people of all walks of life can use public transportation to experience new cultures and flavors. This is a trip anyone can take. By engaging different regions and learning about foodie cities both old and new, we can bring people together.

My transit and culinary exploration began on June 28 in Portland, ME and wrapped up on August 20 in San Francisco. Zigzagging from East to West. I visited a variety of cities including Boston; New York City; Meridian, MS; Charlotte, NC; Atlanta, GA; New Orleans, LA; Memphis, TN; Tucson, AZ; Albuquerque, NM; Oakland and

many beautiful towns in between. Absorbing all types of eateries - whether it's a trendy deli like Frankel's in Brooklyn, a historic lunch spot such as The Four Way in Memphis, or one of DC's fantastic food trucks, it was such an important experience and will better help me to communicate what rail travel can do to create an exchange of ideas and

cultures for towns of all sizes.

SUMMER
BY **RAIL** 2019

In a time of contention, food can be a great unifier. It is easier to have conversations about social change and transportation advocacy while breaking bread and communing over a good meal.

Adventures like this are only possible thanks to the workers of the hospitality and food service industries who strive to make these dreams a reality.

Not only was my time spent utilizing the national network, I also experienced many multimodal and last mile solutions. While I did enjoy the moments I had in large cities with well developed commuter solutions, I do believe my time moving forward will be invested in continuing the fight for rural connectivity,

improving long distance routes, and making travel by rail more accessible. There are definitely nuances to which public transit solutions work best in which areas, there are some common themes I have noticed in my travels and I hope to spend my time as a Grassroots Organizer with RPA rectifying what I can and

coalition building to address what will

require additional support.

My commitment to our passengers moving forward will include working on developing tangible, results driven strategies amongst organizers, elected officials, and city/county representatives who are invested in the future of our routes and the communities they serve.



Madi & Wayne Davis (Photo Credit: Madi Butler)

JOIN RAIL PASSENGERS



RAIL PASSENGERS

A CONNECTED AMERICA

If you're reading the Passengers Voice and are a current member, **THANK YOU** for your support. Rail Passengers invites you to share our membership information with your family, friends, colleagues, etc.

If you're reading the Passengers Voice and are NOT a current member, we invite you to join.

Visit railpassengers.org/join
or call 202-408-6382 to join!

STOP

Looking for the latest in travel advisories and tips?
Be sure to read the **HOTLINE**
each and every Friday.
railpassengers.org/hotline

LOOK

RAIL PASSENGERS MEMBERS SHARE THOUGHTS, POLL RESULTS

QUESTION...

WITH THE CHANGING OF THE SEASONS FROM SUMMER TO FALL, WE WANT TO KNOW WHICH TRAVEL SEASON YOU PREFER?



A. Yes - Summer - The beach is the place for me.

B. No - Fall - Bring on the foliage.

Click here to submit your answer to this poll on social media at <https://www.facebook.com/narprail>, or send in your response via email to: survey@narprail.org.

Each month we conduct polls on social media and in our newsletters to spark conversation and provide another outlet for you to share your thoughts on rail.

In the September issue, we asked: **"Have you canceled or foregone a trip on Amtrak because of changes to the on-board dining options?"**

The poll results were exactly evenly split, with half saying **'Yes & I'm Very Sad'** and the other half saying **'No - Trains Are Still The Best'**

Poll comments included:

- **Gary Bell** - "No, but it is dismaying. Cutting back on extra touches like great dining may save some money but it makes the whole train experience less special. If I just wanted to save money and get a cheap meal, I could fly instead. I personally would much rather pay some more and get a first-class train experience."
- **Brett Michaels** - "I'm actually more inclined now. These food options suit me nicely. No more dining with strangers!"
- **Carl Esposito** - "Yes - Forgoing my annual winter trip on the Silver Meteor...Very sad!"

#RAIL PASSENGERS TRAVEL REVIEW

Feedback on your recent Amtrak travel experience is very important to us! Please take a moment and tell us the good & the

bad of your journey. Share your thoughts at railpassengers.org/travelreview or scan the QR code from your mobile device.



Remember, the progression of the data we collect depends upon the feedback

you provide as well as your outreach to other rail passengers. Please help us to keep this going. If you have any constructive feedback or suggestion, please send an email to TravelReview@narprail.org.

#VIEWSONATRAIN

We are sharing many of the great photos we have received on Instagram (www.instagram.com/railpassengers).

We are also still looking for more submissions. Photos can be submitted via Instagram, Facebook or Twitter depicting your experience as "The Rail Passenger" and your views from a train.

Rail Passengers Association staff will select images, which we will use as part of our new visual identity on our website, in our monthly newsletter, on social media, and more!

When submitting your photos on social media, be sure to use the hashtag [#ViewsOnATrain](https://twitter.com/ViewsOnATrain) and tag [@RailPassengers](https://twitter.com/RailPassengers).

LEAVE A LEGACY

Please consider the Rail Passengers Association in your will. If you have already included us in your estate plans, let Jonsie Stone know at jstone@narprail.org or 202.408.8362 Ext. 3207. We'd like

to thank you for your generosity and make sure the purpose of your gift is understood.



THE HOLIDAYS IS A TIME FOR GIVING... PLEASE REMEMBER THE RAIL PASSENGERS ASSOCIATION

Year-End Giving



As we move closer to the holiday season, your end of year giving decisions may be forefront. We hope the Rail Passengers Association is part of your philanthropic plans. Your generous gift helps us work to build support for a modern, more efficient national passenger rail network. Jonsie and Kim would love to help facilitate your gift or answer any questions you may have. Below is their contact information:

Jonsie Stone
202-408-8362 x 3207
jstone@narprail.org

Kim Williams
202-408-8362 x 3123
kwilliams@narprail.org



ON THE MOVE

Local, state and federal transit agencies have seen several new hires and appointments in recent months, which include:

- **India Birdsong** who became the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority's (RTA) new Chief Executive Officer and General Manager on September 16. Birdsong had most recently been

the Chief Operating Officer for Nashville's WeGo Public. Previous to Nashville, she served 9 years at the Chicago Transit Authority. The Cleveland RTA operates a heavy rail line which was completed in 1968 to the city's airport (the first such rail-airport connection in the country) and two light rail lines (the former Shaker Rapid routes) which now



(Photo Credit: cleveland)

India Birdsong

extend to the waterfront area & the Amtrak station.



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