

See Details on NARP Region 10 Meeting and Registration Form on page 6

President's Message –The Best Defense Is a Good Offense!

by **Richard L. Schmeling**

President Bush has recommended that Amtrak receive no funding for the upcoming fiscal year. Dan Lutz will have a number of reports about the NARP position and other reactions to this disgusting development.

Back when the private railroads had passenger service, the passenger trains had a lot of spokespeople in the form of railroad executives, lobbyists, lawyers and others paid by the railroads to persuade the government to provide help to keep the trains running. When Amtrak was formed, the private railroads were “relieved” of the passenger train burden and concerned themselves only about freight train matters. A number of effective voices for rail passenger operations were thus lost.

As things stand today, only passenger train advocate groups such as NARP and ProRail Nebraska are available to carry the banner. The only voice present and potential rail passengers have is that of advocacy organizations.

How should we react to this latest attempt to kill passenger trains? A similar assault is being made on farm subsidies and a host of other programs. U.S. Senator **Chuck Hagel** has said that we have to bite the bullet and reduce Federal spending. He anticipates a number of calls from constituents maintaining: “yes, we need cuts, but not for (Amtrak, farm subsidies, education)—you fill in the blanks.

I propose and urge that we take the offensive! Instead of trying to defend existing Amtrak funding, point out forcefully that our national rail passenger system as it presently exists is barebones and does not meet the needs of the traveling public. Instead of ending funding for Amtrak, we should increase funding for the National Passenger Rail Corporation and let it buy the new cars (coaches, sleepers and dining cars) and locomotives and fix tracks and other infrastructure. We should initiate service over new routes and increase train frequency on existing routes.

When I called the offices of Congressman **Jeff Fortenberry**, Senator **Ben Nelson** and Senator Hagel to pass along my thoughts, I stressed the following:

- Amtrak is traditionally underfunded.
- Amtrak needs more money and a dedicated source of funding.
- If we need to cut funding to reduce the deficit, we should simply reallocate funds to worthy programs rather than phase them out. A big cut in airline and highway subsidies would go a long way toward providing funding for Amtrak and cut overall Federal spending.
- Amtrak is the all-weather mode and is particularly needed in Nebraska where weather can shut down or delay other modes of transportation.
- Another terrorist attack could well ground the nation's airlines for a period of time and by eliminating Amtrak, we would abandon one of the logical and available alternatives to the vulnerable airline system.

Many other points could be made. By taking people off the highways, we cut pollution, lessen our dependence on imported oil, curb the grisly highway accident toll and provide a means for those who can't or won't drive to get around.

The message must be that Amtrak must be expanded rather than contracted and that we need to accept the fact that all forms of public transportation must receive subsidies. As UNL Professor Wallace Peterson says: “Every form of transportation, including walking, receives a government subsidy.”

President's Message - Continued

To require Amtrak to operate at a profit is just silly! If the airlines had to pay the true cost of terminals and for flight controllers rather than have them furnished by the Federal government, how many firms would avoid bankruptcy? Requiring "profitability" ignores the fact that transportation is just another form of public utility. Would we want the water system to turn a profit? Do we insist that a public health service turn a profit?

Instead of adopting defensive posture, let's go on the offensive and hold our elected representatives accountable. Find out their position on Amtrak and if they are not favorable, let them know you will not vote for them at the next election! Encourage them to find and guarantee a dedicated source of funding for Amtrak. Tell them we need a second pair of trains across Nebraska to provide a schedule that is convenient for Nebraska residents.

During each of my calls, I stressed that the trains run full most of the time and that on certain days you cannot ride the *California Zephyr* because there is no space (coach or sleeper) available. Amtrak does not have the bucks to afford fixing, renovating or purchasing rolling stock, i.e., locomotives and cars, to meet current passenger demand on many of its routes.

The freight railroads were once allies of passenger rail. BNSF, CSX and Norfolk Southern try to make it possible to run Amtrak trains on time. But...there is a large railroad (largest in the U.S.) headquartered in Omaha, that considers Amtrak trains a nuisance and would like to see them gone. **Is it a coincidence that the big railroad built a replica of the open platform of a passenger car to serve as a podium at the Republican National Convention...and that George W. Bush suddenly decides to do away with Amtrak?**

Crank up the engines, load the guns and let's go on the offensive!

UNL Study in Progress –submitted by Richard Schmeling

In a recent telephone conversation, a spokesperson for the UNL Bureau of Sociological Research reported that the questions related to rail passenger service submitted by ProRail Nebraska were included in a survey and that data collection (interviews and tabulating responses) is underway. Calls to those selected to be sampled started the last week of November, somewhat behind schedule. The sample is large, which is why the survey is still ongoing. I am told that the larger the sample surveyed, the more confidence there is in the results being accurate and more nearly reflecting the opinions of the population as a whole. We'll look forward to seeing the results.

Head for Grand Island on February 26

ProRail Nebraska will hold a non-business meeting in Grand Island on February 26 in conjunction with the annual banquet sponsored by the Great Plains Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society. Attendance, as always, is optional, but we would encourage our members to come and have some fun.

The banquet begins at 6 p.m. at the Plum Street Station (formerly CB&Q) at 603 Plum Street in east Grand Island. Cost of the two-meat dinner will be \$17 per person. Those who have attended in the past know that the meal is very tasty and served in ample portions.

The earlier part of Saturday will be spent as individuals choose in a variety of activities. For who like to photograph trains, meet at the depot at 10 a.m. You can take advantage of an offer to rainfan the BNSF Ravenna line and then down to the U.P. main line and back to Grand Island. Some who are

BNSF-saturated may elect to spend the day at the U.P.-BNSF crossing in Grand Island striving for that perfect shot of a BNSF train over the top as a U.P. train passes underneath!

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Plans for Grand Island Meeting - Continued

For those who enjoy model railroading, the Tri-City Model Railroad Assn. recently-completed HO layout will be available for viewing. No charge for this activity, but donations welcome.

The evening program, *“The World According to NARP, an Amtrak Odyssey,”* will be presented by **Chuck Furst** and **Bryan Eckert**. Before the banquet, books, DVD’s, video tapes and other railroad-related items will be on sale by the Great Plains Chapter—many at a discounted price—to add to your railroad library/collection.

Call **Roger Clark** at (308) 381-1581 to make your reservation. Hope to see you there!

Other Developments of Interest Relating to Passenger Rail

Bill Introduced in Nebraska Legislature to Re-Name Nebr. Dept. of Roads

State Senator **Pam Brown** of Omaha has introduced LB 679 in the current session which would re-name the Nebraska Department of Roads to the Nebraska Department of Surface Transportation. ProRail supports this effort to change transportation focus for Nebraska and will testify at the bill’s hearing as it comes up on the schedule of the Transportation and Telecommunications Committee. A similar bill has been introduced in previous sessions and failed to pass.

-ProRail Nebraska- -ProRail Nebraska-

Nebr. Congressman Named to Transportation Committee

Tom Osborne, representing the Third Congressional District in Nebraska, has been named to the House of Representatives Transportation Committee. In the past, he has not been active in pursuing issues relating to mass transportation. His attention is needed, with three Amtrak California Zephyr stops in his district—Hastings, Holdrege and McCook. With Second District Congressman **Lee Terry** seemingly oblivious to transportation issues, and newly-elected First District Congressman **Jeff Fortenberry** “learning the ropes,” Osborne will be a key contact on transportation matters. Departed Congressman **Doug Bereuter** was a solid passenger rail advocate during his long tenure in the House.

-ProRail Nebraska- -ProRail Nebraska-

Two State Senators Named to Commission Slots

Nebraska is a member of the multi-state Midwest High Speed Rail Compact. As such, it is entitled to have four members on the Commission board—two state legislators and two individuals named by the governor. State Senators **Abbie Cornett**, a retired police officer from Bellevue; and **Arnie Stuthman**, a farmer and cattle feeder from Platte Center, were designated by their colleagues to replace State Senator **Diana Schimek** of Lincoln and former State Senator **Curt Bromm** of Wahoo. The other two designees from Nebraska have been **Ray Lineweber**, a railroad union leader; and **Dan Hoffman**, an advisor in the Governor’s Policy Research Office. With a change to a new Nebraska Governor, it was not known at this writing whether Lineweber and Hoffman remain as Nebraska representatives on the Commission. Iowa is currently not a member of the Midwest Compact, but it is hoped the state will soon join.

-ProRail Nebraska- -ProRail Nebraska-

Reactions to Bush Goal of Cutting All Subsidies to Amtrak

Background: For fiscal year 2005, President Bush requested \$900 million. Congress, recognizing that this would force a shutdown, wisely increased that to \$1.2 billion. Amtrak’s initial request was \$1.8 billion, later revised to \$1.5 billion. Amtrak has said that \$1.2 billion for FY 2006 would be unworkable, due to deferrals in capital investment and maintenance for both rolling stock and infrastructure.

Excerpt from NARP news release re Budget Cuts Which Would Kill Amtrak Service

The Administration’s Fiscal 2006 Department of Transportation budget proposed elimination of all funding for Amtrak. The National Association of Railroad Passengers condemns this proposal as radical and irresponsible.

Proposal to Cut All Subsidies to Amtrak - Continued

It would end virtually all intercity rail passenger service in the nation, including through service on the Northeast Corridor between Boston, New York and Washington, D.C. This places the burden of funding intercity passenger rail entirely on states that do not have the financial resources to assume such an unfounded mandate. States with limited resources would place first priority on saving the commuter operations within their borders. The \$360 million the Administration promises to make available directly to states may not be sufficient to maintain even these operations much less through trains that cross state lines. Past experiences demonstrates that any expectation of the states cooperating to fund such service is unwarranted and unrealistic

...”Clearly, they are targeting Amtrak’s long distance services and misrepresenting crucial facts. Far from lacking demand, the long distance routes handle more travel volume each year than the Northeast Corridor (NEC)—nearly 30 percent more than the conventional trains and five times more than Acela Express and Metroliner. Far from being inefficient, the long distance network costs less per passenger mile to operate than either of the NEC services. It is a common misconception that the long distance trains are “money losers” while the NEC trains are “profitable.” None of them are profitable, including the new high speed Acela Express.

Excerpt from Amtrak CEO David Gunn’s Message to Employees re Zero Budget Proposal:

President Bush sent to Congress his proposed budget for FY ’06. It provides no funding for Amtrak. In contrast, this year we are spending \$1.4 billion, of which \$1.2 billion is from a federal appropriation to support our operations and capital programs across the country.

The President’s proposal does provide \$360 million to the Surface Transportation Board for continued commuter and freight operations on the NEC only after forcing an Amtrak bankruptcy. It also isn’t accompanied by any kind of plan for how Amtrak could continue operation. In a word, they have no plans for Amtrak other than bankruptcy.

Obviously, the proposal is irresponsible and a surprising disappointment. It doesn’t acknowledge all the hard work you’ve done over the past two years to run a tighter and better ship. Our costs are more under control than ever before.

It is critical that reforms and improvements must continue, however. Amtrak’s management is engaged with its board, the Department of Transportation and others for this purpose. That work continues. We re committed to an efficient and productive rail passenger system. The plan to force us into bankruptcy would be counterproductive to this goal.

The President’s proposal is only the start of a long legislative process, and we are taking it very seriously. This process has a lot of twists and turns, and it always takes six to nine months to sort out. It won’t have nay impact through the ’05 fiscal year, but there’s going to be very little cash left at the end of this year...I am committed to doing everything I can to secure adequate funding for ’06. We have strong support in Congress and a lot of support across the country.

Encouraging Amtrak Ridership Numbers: Ridership growth of 4.3 percent in FY 2004 set a record with 25.1 million, up more than one million from the previous record—24.0 million in FY 2003. The growth was across all services—corridor trains as well as long distance trains.

Amtrak operates as many as 265 trains each weekday, serving nearly 66,000 passengers a more than 500 stations in 46 states, along more than 22,000 miles of track.

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Later Developments – Gunn and Mineta

Gunn comments in talk Feb. 11 at University of Illinois

The (Bush) Administration has said it would not fund Amtrak until reforms are made, but “I have not been given specific requests as to what reforms are wanted.” Gunn criticized the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) for not having a long-range plan for rail travel in the U.S. “Tell us what you want us to do and we can do it...the fact of the matter is they (USDOT) do not have an implementable plan,” he said. Gunn said it is unrealistic to expect to have a rail system in the U.S. that is not subsidized, and that it is a mistake for the federal government to fund highways and airlines but not railways. “Do you want to chew up scarce airport capacity, or do you want to get them on a train?” Gunn asked.

Norman Mineta named Feb. 11 as Transportation Secretary

Mineta vowed to press a controversial plan to overhaul Amtrak financing in order to end “a drain on the budget.” Mineta, former Democratic mayor from San Jose, Calif., said he would work to win congressional plan to reduce federal spending on the government-subsidized rail system by shifting a greater burden to states served by Amtrak on the East and West coasts.

Federal assistance to Amtrak ought to be on the same basis as federal assistance for highways and metropolitan transit systems, with the federal government paying a smaller share of the costs, he said. Mineta said he backs the hard-nosed plan requiring states to pay up or lose service.

“If a train goes through a state and that state is not willing to pony up the state’s share, then we would run the train through that state, not stopping and keeping the doors closed,” Mineta said.

The transportation chief said he intends to “deal with the long-term longevity of Amtrak, which receives \$1.2 billion under Bush’s latest annual budget, about \$600 million less than Amtrak requested. Mineta added: “we have spent something like \$37 billion on Amtrak (since its inception in 1970). It has been a drain on the budget, and we haven’t really improved services in a major way. I want to make sure that we keep this system safe and provide a good service.”

Mineta, so far, remains the only Democrat in the Bush Cabinet. He served as commerce secretary in the Cabinet of President Bill Clinton.

-ProRail Nebraska- -ProRail Nebraska-

What can you do right now to respond to Amtrak Budget Mess?

Recommendations from Natl. Assn. of Railroad Passengers:

Contact President Bush, but especially your House and Senate members and let them know that this proposal is acceptable. U.S. (snail) mail not advised—takes too long to be delivered. Consider phone or contact through appropriate websites:

White House comment line: 202-456-1111, fax: 202-456-2461

House and Senate Switchboard: 202-224-3121

House website: <http://www.house.gov> (Enter zipcode at top)

Senate website: <http://www.senate.gov> (choose your state from the drop-down menu)

Send a short, concise letter to the editor to dailies especially – Omaha, Lincoln, Hastings, Holdrege, McCook (Amtrak stops); as well as Grand Island, Kearney, Columbus, Fremont, North Platte, Nebraska City, Norfolk (located within reasonable driving distance of Amtrak stops)

