



# ProRail Nebraska News

Dedicated to supporting and advocating for railroad service in the State of Nebraska

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Volume XXX

October 2020

## ProRail Nebraska Board Meeting

Saturday, November 14, 2020 - 9:00 am to Noon

Because of the coronavirus pandemic

we will utilize Zoom video conference service for this meeting

Audio participation by phone is also available.

All ProRail Nebraska members and supporters are invited to participate.

We will discuss results of the Nov. 3 election and its impact on Nebraska Legislature's support for improved railroad service and public transit in our state and other ProRail business.

For participant instructions, please contact Bob Kuzelka 402-417-9424 or email [rkuzelka1@unl.edu](mailto:rkuzelka1@unl.edu)

## Surveyed Candidates Support Passenger Rail Service

By Bob Kuzelka, ProRail Vice President

Fourteen federal and state legislative candidates expressed strong support for passenger rail service in a recent survey conducted by ProRail Nebraska.

Five congressional candidates and eleven legislative candidates responded. The survey was distributed in August to all 12 candidates for Nebraska's four U S Congressional seats and all 44 candidates for 25 seats in the Nebraska Legislature. All seats will be decided in the November 3rd general election. No congressional incumbent candidates responded to the survey. Three legislative incumbent candidates responded to the survey.

Fourteen of the sixteen responding candidates were in agreement with all survey issues. One congressional candidate and one legislative candidate expressed only limited agreement with the issues. The issues were supporting passenger rail service with state funds, establishing commuter rail service between Lincoln and Omaha, increasing from once daily the rail service through Nebraska between Chicago and Denver and participating in Midwest regional passenger rail planning and advocacy.

Thirteen responding candidates had traveled by passenger rail train. Satisfied comments on their experiences included "We have enjoyed the relaxing travel to Chicago, Memphis and D. C. by sleeping car." and "Traveling with my son to Washington, D. C. and Florida was made a pleasure with the use of Amtrak sleeping and eating arrangements." and "Spent the trip with friends in conversation and relaxation without having to worry about driving." The Summary and Analysis of the survey responses appears on pages 3 and 4.

# Will the California Zephyr go Tri-weekly this Fall?

By Richard Schmeling, ProRail Director – District 1 & Lobbyist



*One of Amtrak's 75 new Siemens Charger diesel-electric locomotives*

Amtrak announced June 17 that it is cutting the California Zephyr that runs through Omaha and Lincoln from daily to three times per week effective October 1st. [UPDATE: Implementation of tri-weekly operation was delayed until the week of October 5<sup>th</sup>.]

The justification for the service reduction is the pandemic-plagued economy. However, I believe the financial solution is not eliminating daily service but tailoring the number of train cars to passenger reservations. The Zephyr also serves three other stations in Nebraska: Hastings, Holdridge, and McCook.

Amtrak tried this a number of years back, and it confused travelers. It was difficult for travelers to match up train schedules with the days they wanted to travel. The long-distance passenger train network in this country is a disgrace. Like Japan, Italy and India, we should be adding more trains rather than taking them away.

Of Amtrak's 15 long-distance routes 13, including the Zephyr, presently operate daily. All but the east coast Auto Train would be cut to tri-weekly service October 1. Amtrak's Cardinal and Sunset trains already operate tri-weekly.

ProRail Nebraska is opposed to this service reduction. Daily train service **MUST** be the very minimum service level. We **MUST** make sure that Amtrak has enough funds to maintain the workforce it needs to fully restore service once the demand for travel recovers and to run all National Network long-distance trains at least daily once the long recovery from COVID-19 is behind us.

ProRail President, Matthew Roque was interviewed June 18th on NET Radio, and stated "These changes will hurt people who rely on the service to get to Omaha or Lincoln for healthcare appointments and other essential trips. I think what's most important about Amtrak service to remember is that it's not a luxury, it's something that some people use every day or something that some people use because they have no other option. It's public transportation."

We can't fight alone! ProRail Nebraska and the Rail Passengers Association need your partnership. Please contact your elected representatives in Congress and ask them to provide Amtrak with sufficient emergency funding to maintain daily service on its long-distance trains during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS  
2020 PRORAIL NEBRASKA  
SURVEY OF NEBRASKA FEDERAL AND STATE LEGISLATIVE  
CANDIDATES AND OFFICEHOLDERS**

9/25/2020

**Purpose, Scope and Design of Survey**

The 2020 ProRail Nebraska Survey of Nebraska Federal and State Legislative Candidates and Officeholders (Survey) was intended to determine their interest and attitudes related to passenger rail.

Response forms for the Survey were distributed to 56 candidates and 26 current officeholders by mail on August 8, 2020. Recipients were asked to return the completed form by August 24, 2020 in the stamped envelope provided. 19 forms were returned.

The Survey included four opinion statements and one yes or no question. Additional comments were invited.

**PRN PASSENGER RAIL OPINION SURVEY RESPONSE FORM**

*Circle “Agree” or “Disagree” for each of the following statements:*

1. Nebraska should use state funds for planning and implementation of improved passenger rail service in the state. AGREE DISAGREE
2. Nebraska should immediately plan and eventually implement commuter rail service between Lincoln and Omaha. AGREE DISAGREE
3. Nebraska should support and help to implement an increase of the now once daily passenger rail service each way between Chicago, Omaha, Lincoln and Denver AGREE DISAGREE
4. Nebraska should rejoin the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact with the states of KS, ND, MN, MO, IL, MI and IN. AGREE DISAGREE

*Circle “Yes” or “No” for the following question. If you circle yes, please give some details about your experience on the reverse of this form.*

5. Have you ever traveled by passenger rail train? YES NO

**Responses from Federal Legislative Candidates**

12 candidates were surveyed and 5 forms were completed and returned as follows. Letter after name indicates political affiliation: D – Democratic, L – Libertarian.

*U. S. Senate:* **Chris Janicek** (D) agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

*U. S. Congressional District 1:* **Kate Bolz** (D) agreed with statements 1, 3 and 4 and with some limitations on statement 2 \* and answered yes to question 5 with no comments; **Dennis Grace** (L) agreed with statements with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

*U. S. Congressional District 2:* **Kara Eastman** (D) agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

*U. S. Congressional District 3:* **Mark Ellsworth** (D) agreed with statement 2 and disagreed with statements 1, 3 and 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

\* Bolz agreed with statement 2 after rewording “immediately plan and eventually implement” with “study opportunities for”.

**Responses from Federal Legislative Officeholders**

1 officeholder was surveyed and no form was returned.

*Continued on page 4*

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS *second page*

### Responses from State Legislative Candidates

44 candidates were surveyed and 11 forms were completed and returned as follows. Letter indicates incumbent candidate – I. Candidates for Nebraska Unicameral Legislature are all listed as non-partisan.

*District 1, Otoe, Johnson, Nemaha, Pawnee and Richardson Counties:* **Janet Palmtag** agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

*District 3, Bellevue:* **Rick Holdcroft** agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered no to question 5; **Carol Blood** (I) agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

*District 11, Omaha:* **Terrell McKinney** agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered no to question 5; **Fred Conley** agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

*District 25, Lincoln:* **Suzanne Geist** (I) agreed with statement 4 and disagreed with statements 1, 2, and 3 and answered no to question 5 and made comments; **Stephany Pleasant** agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with no comments

*District 31, Omaha:* **Rich Pahls** agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

*District 35, Grand Island:* **Dan Quick** (I) agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

*District 39, Omaha:* **Allison Heimes** agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

*District 49, Gretna:* **Jen Day** agreed with statements 1 – 4 and answered yes to question 5 with comments

### Responses from State Legislative Officeholders

25 officeholders were surveyed and 3 forms were completed and returned as follows. Senators in the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature are all listed as non-partisan.

*District 30, Lincoln:* **Myron Dorn** agreed with statements 1, 3 and 4, disagreed with statement 2, answered no to question 5 with no comments.

*District 32, Fillmore, Saline, Thayer, Jefferson and part of Lancaster Counties:* **Tom Brandt**, agree with statement 3, disagree with statement 1, expressed no opinion on statements 2 and 4 and answered yes to question 5 with no comments

*District 40, Rock, Boyd, Holt, Knox, Cedar, and Dixon Counties:* **Tim Gragert** expressed no opinion on statements 1 – 4 and answered no to question 5 with no comments

### Analysis of Candidate Responses

14 of the 16 responding candidates agreed with all the survey statements. 13 of the respondents had traveled by passenger rail train. It is safe to say that interest and support of passenger rail is closely related to experience with passenger rail. This realization and the very limited rail passenger service now available in Nebraska will continue to make difficult the passage of supportive rail passenger legislation in the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature.

Although ProRail Nebraska does not endorse any legislative candidates we do encourage voters on November 3<sup>rd</sup> to support candidates who gave positive responses to the opinions in this survey

*Summary and Analysis prepared by Bob Kuzelka, PRN Vice President, and approved by PRN Board.*

*Questions about the Survey should be directed to [rkuzelka1@unl.edu](mailto:rkuzelka1@unl.edu).*



# Lincoln Transit News

By Richard Schmeling, ProRail Director – District 1 & President of Citizens for Improved Transit

With the onset of Covid-19 restrictions, Lincoln's StarTran Transit initiated fare-free service, and passengers were requested to board and leave the bus using the rear door to minimize exposure to drivers. Because of the sharp decline in ridership in late March, service was cut to less than half the usual weekday service. However, on August 10<sup>th</sup> StarTran resumed regular schedules.

Because of Covid-19 concerns, UNL contracted with Arrow Stage Lines to provide "shadow" buses to follow the StarTran buses on heavily utilized Routes 24 and 25. When the StarTran driver notes that he has 15 passengers on the bus, that bus will not pick up more passengers and the following Arrow bus will take them. The operations manager at Arrow told me they will also haul non-University passengers along the StarTran routes. The Arrow buses on Routes 24 and 25 observe the StarTran schedules.

There will be no shadow buses on Route 23 since it is not as heavily used. At the request of UNL, StarTran no longer runs Route 22 from East Campus to the Innovation Campus. The University is operating a van for the few riders on this route.

I recently checked with the UNL College of Engineering and learned that the charter bus service provided by Arrow Stages between the UNL, UNO, and UNMC campuses still operates. However, service is now limited to College of Engineering students and staff. Also, the buses no longer make the West Omaha stop except by prior reservation.

# Omaha Metro Transit News

By Clyde Anderson - Editor

O-Metro's new ORBT bus rapid transit service will launch later this Fall. It will run from Westroads to downtown Omaha, replacing Route 2. It will connect major destinations along Omaha's major corridor – education, employment, neighborhoods, hospitals, recreation, retail, and more – and stop less frequently than local bus routes, helping riders reach their destinations faster. It will connect with almost every other bus route that O-Metro offers, making the whole system more reliable.

ORBT will have 27 stops. 23 will be stations with raised platforms and canopies, ticket vending machines, and computer displays showing bus arrival times and other rider information. Some will offer Heartland B-Cycle bicycle rental stations. Touchless fare payment options will be used.

The new service will utilize 60-foot articulated buses fueled by natural gas. They are painted in a new orange and gray scheme that will be unique to the ORBT service. O-Metro is recruiting experienced transit riders to serve as ambassadors at each ORBT station the first Sunday and Monday of launch.

Omaha Metro ended its Fare Free operation June 3rd, and on July 20th increased service on weekdays to "modified" normal. In response to Omaha's mask mandate, effective Aug. 12 all O-Metro passengers must wear masks. However, I've observed a few passengers who don't, and I don't blame the drivers for not enforcing the mandate.

## It's Almost Membership Renewal Time

*If you are a ProRail Nebraska member, please watch for your 2021 membership renewal letter which will be mailed in late November. If you would like to become a member, please send a check for \$20 (more is always welcome!) to Morrie Tuttle, ProRail Nebraska Secretary, 1910 Lake St., Lincoln NE 68502-3816 or call Morrie at (402) 435-5454 for more membership information.*

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## Omaha Amtrak Station Umbrella Shed Refurbished

August 27, 2020 - Article & Photo by David Seidel



station is the small building to the left (east) of the Burlington Station.

The Omaha Amtrak platform shed project is moving right along. Can't believe how much work was done on the shed the last week of August - and in this 100 degree weather!!!! Those steel workers had to be HOT but their work is unbelievable. The shed will be most welcomed to the train passengers in bad weather; but I have to say how much it adds to the Burlington Station looks - the people of KETV Channel 7 who now occupy the old station should be pleased with the good look it gives their building now. The Amtrak