

Rail Passengers Association Report

For ProRail Nebraska Meeting – Saturday, November 13, 2021

By Jim Hanna – ProRail District #4 Director & RPA Council Representative for Nebraska

I am sorry that I can't be here in person today, but I had a prior engagement. Therefore, I am submitting this report in writing.

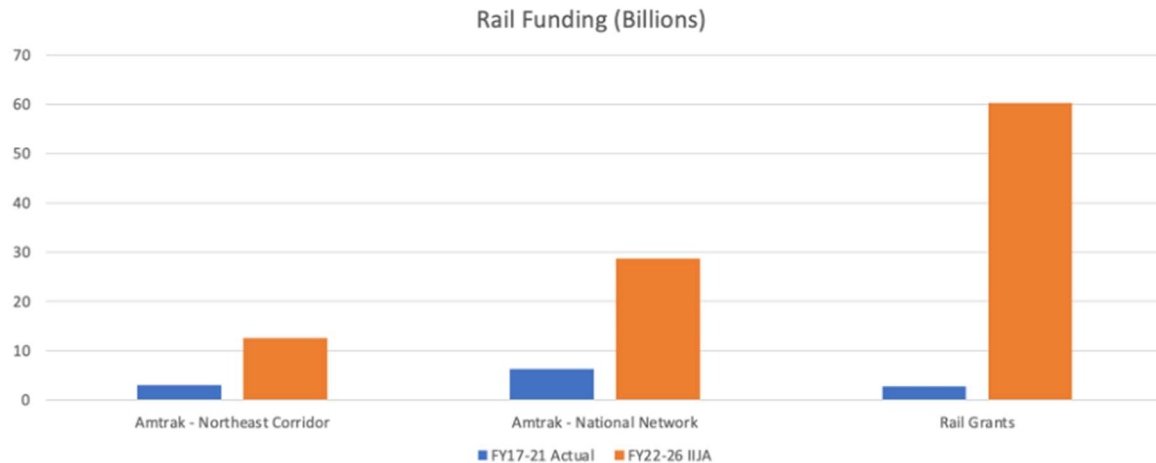
Certainly the most significant rail passenger news, perhaps since the formation of Amtrak, is the passage of the federal Investment in Infrastructure and Jobs Act (IIJA), which will be a game-changer for passenger rail in the US. It is also certain that without the intense efforts of RPA CEO Jim Matthews and his small, but mighty Washington staff, and the pressure from RPA members across the country, that Congress would not have allocated nearly the amount in the final bill as they did to rail! Work on this started more than two years ago, before the bill was even drafted, to lay the groundwork. RPA brought undeniable evidence to Congress of the positive economic benefit of passenger rail to the communities served, especially in rural areas where Amtrak may be the only public transportation available, resulting in the following actions PRIOR to the passage of IIJA:

- \$2+ billion in emergency COVID funding, paired with mandates to restore Daily Service across the National Network;
- Statement from the Congress that long-distance passenger rail is an essential part of the nation's transportation system, specifically for rural parts of the country, and should be retained to ensure connectivity throughout the National Network;
- Requirement to invest in the capital improvements for the *Southwest Chief*, and a prohibition on the use of these funds to "discontinue, reduce the frequency of, suspend, or substantially alter" the route;
- Return of discounted passenger fares for U.S. military veterans;
- Restoration of station agents to any Amtrak station that had a ticket agent position eliminated in fiscal year 2018;
- Congressional direction to Amtrak to improve communication and collaboration with local partners and take into consideration the unique needs of each community, including impacts to local jobs, when making decisions related to the staffing of Amtrak stations.

Passage of IIJA will bring a new era of progress to passenger rail, with a level of federal funding that far exceeds anything in recent history:

Just compare the levels of funding for passenger trains from the prior five years under the FAST Act, to the next five years under the IIJA.

Last Five Years vs. Next Five Years



Rail Passengers Association applauds the work Congress put into the bipartisan infrastructure bill, which marks a new era for America’s passenger rail network. This funding will modernize vast stretches of the existing U.S. passenger rail network, undoing decades of disinvestment. Amtrak passengers will see newly refurbished train interiors and brand new trainsets; expanded and upgraded train stations and platforms; additional frequencies that offer more convenient travel options and connections; and new energy-efficient locomotives. Passengers will also benefit from the less glamorous upgrades to our aging rail infrastructure that will eliminate delays, add capacity and reduce trip-times: new bridges, rebuilt tunnels, upgraded signals, additional sidings, crossovers and double-tracking. These upgrades will touch every part of the existing system—and, we hope, lay the foundation for dozens of new corridors across the U.S.

But it’s not just funding. Rail Passengers has also worked with Congressional allies to secure meaningful oversight of Amtrak, with increased opportunities for passengers to have a say in what kind of train service their communities have access to. We’ve ensured better geographic representation and transparency for Amtrak’s board; increased oversight for Amtrak’s long-distance routes; protections for rural Amtrak communities; and the creation of a food and beverage working group for passengers to provide input into the onboard experience.

(Preceding information from the RPA web site)

The Rail Passengers Association has proven to be the most effective advocate for passenger service in the country, and I would urge anyone with a desire to have more and better passenger trains to join.

I had the opportunity in September to experience Amtrak in person for the first time since COVID became a part of our existence. The opportunity arose to ride the private car “Hollywood Beach” to the American Association of Private Rail Car Owners (AAPRCO) to Vermont for their annual autumn convention. In fact, I became an associate member of AAPRCO so my wife and I could enjoy some of the convention activities. We took the California Zephyr from Omaha to Chicago, so we were able to see firsthand how Amtrak is functioning for ordinary coach passengers. Since the eastbound Zephyr is subject to delays in numerous places between California and Omaha, we left a day prior to our scheduled departure behind the Amtrak Lake Shore Limited. The Zephyr rolled into Omaha only about 30 minutes late, and that only due to having to put a passenger off somewhere after Denver for refusing to wear a face mask. The train was not packed, but was busier than I expected. Our car was one that had been recently refurbished, so it was in very good condition considering its age, and everything seemed to be working well. Staff was helpful, professional, and attentive. The only downside was that coach passengers are still unable to enjoy the diner, but for such a short trip that was tolerable. The concessions in the sightseer lounge car were sufficient.

Five private cars left Chicago behind the Lake Shore Limited on the evening of September 24, with the “Hollywood Beach” as the tail car. This was very nice, as the lounge area of this former Seaboard Air Line sleeper/lounge has huge windows that extend up into the roof, and glass on the rear. In addition to car owners Keith and Maggie White, we travelled with another couple from Omaha, and two gentlemen we did not know, but whose company we came to enjoy. Arrival in Albany, NY was close to on schedule. The private cars were dropped off, and joined seven others already there. Albany has a very modern Amtrak station with raised platforms for easy boarding. The following morning two chartered Amtrak P42 locomotives, including #100, wearing black paint and the “Connecting America for 50 Years” slogan, moved the train to Rutland, Vermont. While under Amtrak power, we were also subject to Amtrak rules, so open vestibules were prohibited.

At Rutland, Vermont Railway took over the train, with GP-38-2s Clarendon & Pittsford #204 and Vermont Railway #307 on the point, along with their power car. Vermont Rail allowed upper vestibule doors to be open, a boon for photography. Soon we were on our way south through the beautiful scenery, with the trees just starting to change to fall colors. Our car was positioned mid-train, but with the open vestibules this was not a problem. We arrived late in the afternoon in the village of North Bennington, where we were treated to a runby past the very impressive Victorian styled brick depot, now a museum.

The next morning we were advised by Keith that a malfunction in the dishwasher had drained most of the water from our car, and that there were no watering facilities in North Bennington, so we would have to conserve. We retraced our route of the previous day back to Rutland, where we were able to take on some water, then headed southeast to Bellows Falls, where the town had arranged a nice greeting for us at the historic depot, with live music, food, drinks, and

local artisans. Some of the downtown businesses had stayed open later than usual for our enjoyment. We were able to locate and photograph the interesting tunnel that takes trains under much of the business district.

Local people treated us to free coffee and apple cider donuts prior to departure in the morning. Again we returned to Rutland, then headed north. We made a stop for another runby at the Amtrak station at Ferrisburgh-Vergennes. About 2:30 p.m. we crossed what has to be the shortest railroad drawbridge in the world, at about 50 feet, and rolled into the yard at Burlington, on the shore of beautiful Lake Champlain. Our train was split in two and parked on adjacent yard tracks. The yard is on the south edge of the downtown, which is within walking distance.

The convention meetings took place September 29 at a nearby hotel. I attended the morning session, where three Amtrak representatives who are responsible for private car operations were present. The Amtrak attitude toward private cars, charters, and excursions has improved considerably under the new Amtrak CEO. Long-time passenger rail advocate, Ross Capon, was there and announced that he would be retiring as AAPRCO's Washington liaison, but that he would continue to be involved as an advisor to the organization. That afternoon we rented a car and did some sightseeing, which we also did the following day. In the evening AAPRCO had arranged for a dinner cruise on Lake Champlain.

On October 1 we began the journey home, heading south toward Rutland. There was a final runby at Proctor, Vermont, near the Vermont Marble Museum, which pays tribute to what was once one of the state's primary industries. I have to say that the Vermont Railway personnel were a pleasure to work with, and very accommodating. At Rutland the train was turned over to Amtrak, and was moved back to Albany. Because of the amount of switching required, it was not possible to connect with the westbound Lake Shore Limited that day, so we got to spend almost a day in Albany, which gave us the opportunity to enjoy a bit of the city.

At about 7:00 p.m. on October 2 we were headed west at the rear of the Lake Shore Limited. I had not noticed it so much on the eastbound trip, but the CSX trackage west of Albany is very rough, even tossing the "Hollywood Beach" around, and it is one of the best riding cars I have ridden. We arrived at Chicago Union Station just before 10:00 the next morning. Thanks to our status as private varnish passengers we were allowed to patronize the Amtrak Metropolitan Lounge, a nice place to wait for the 2:00 p.m. departure of the California Zephyr, and an uneventful, on-time trip back to Omaha.

Jim Hanna, RPA Council Representative for Nebraska