

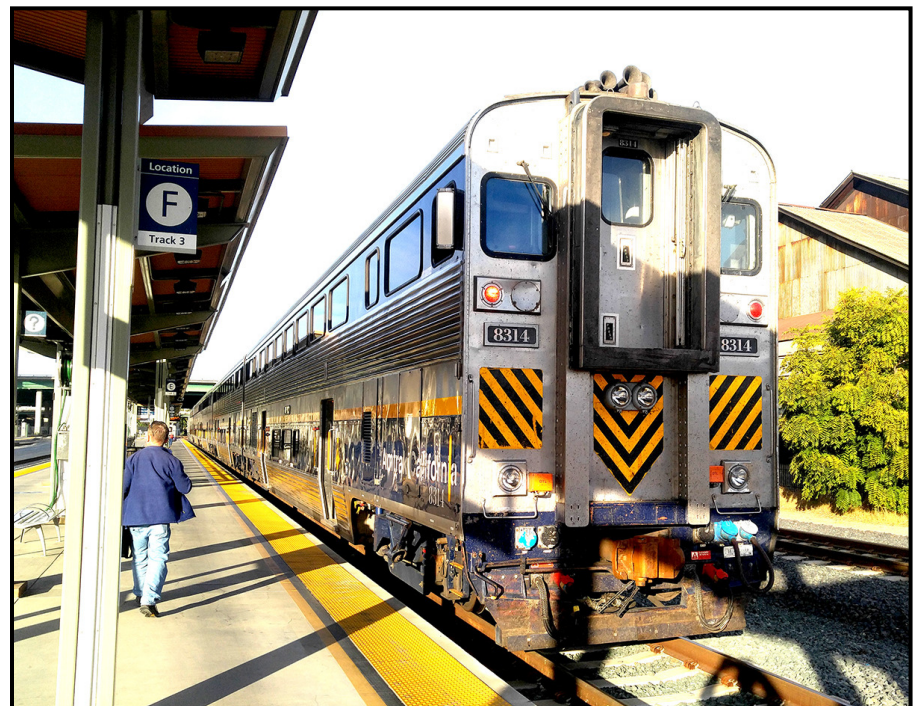
## Rail Passengers Association

### Report on RailNation California Conference 2019

By Jim Hanna, PRN Dist. 4 Director & Liaison to RPA – Photos by the author except as noted

The annual fall meeting of the Rail Passengers Association (RPA) took place at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Sacramento, California on October 18-20, 2019. I must confess to having used air transportation as my schedule did not allow time to go via the California Zephyr. I am pleased to report that both the Denver and Sacramento airports use rail guided rubber tired people movers to convey passengers from the concourses to the terminal buildings.

On Friday the 18<sup>th</sup> optional tours were available, to ride the Sonoma-Marín Area Rapid Transit (SMART), to tour the Sacramento transit system, or to visit the California State Railroad Museum. I chose the SMART trip. We started from the Amtrak Sacramento Valley Station, located in the beautifully restored, majestic Southern Pacific Depot, which has become the area transit hub, fulfilling the role very well. The depot was quite busy. Busses load closest to the rear of the depot, with light rail just beyond, and the Amtrak platform is a lengthy walk through a tunnel. Our group boarded one of the Amtrak Capitol Corridor trains that run from Auburn to San Jose. The former Southern Pacific Shops, now closed and looking forlorn, were just north of the tracks, very near the terminus of the western end of the original transcontinental railroad. I was told that there are plans to renovate the buildings for new purposes.



Leaving Sacramento the train passes through the broad Central Valley, one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. It looks remarkably like the Platte Valley of Nebraska in many places, except for the mountains in the distance, some unfamiliar crops, and different soil preparation in some fields. The train was heavily patronized even though we were past the peak commuting time. The bi-level cars have both coach seating and table seating on both levels. The lower level has large accessible restrooms and storage for bicycles and luggage. A café car near the center of the train serves a menu similar to other Amtrak cafes. Bicycles are a common commuter mode in cities, and all of the transit modes accommodate them that we rode.

After passing the Suisun-Fairfield Station the scenery changed. The hills got much closer and the farmland turned into rather sad looking marsh. The strange sight of some large ships out the train window disclosed that a bay of the Pacific Ocean extends quite a way inland. Someone familiar with the area said that some of those derelict craft were the last of the World War II Liberty Ships. Our train passed over a narrow spot in Suisun Bay just before we reached Martinez. From there the tracks are right along San Pablo Bay, literally just a few feet from the water to our destination of Richmond. This certainly bore no resemblance to Nebraska. There is some beautiful scenery along the route, but also a lot of heavy industry, much of it rail served.

Richmond is a rather rough industrial community. The Amtrak Station is a transfer point to the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system, which was one of the earliest modern rail transit systems in the U.S. and has been suffering from problems related to age of equipment and poor maintenance in recent years. While still on the platform we were treated to the appearance of Richmond Pacific GP 15-1



#424, nice and clean in spiffy blue and black livery, followed by a wide vision caboose, also similarly adorned, and a short string of tank cars. The Richmond Pacific is a 2.5 mile long terminal railroad that moves cars from the wharves to interchanges with the Union Pacific and BNSF Railway.



We boarded a small charter bus that took us across a long, interesting double deck bridge over the bay, with westbound traffic on the upper deck and eastbound below. The town of San Quentin and its famous namesake lockup are just off the end of the bridge. We were delivered to San Rafael, the southern terminus of the SMART train. SMART began service in August of 2017, operating on the route of the former Northwestern Pacific Railroad (NWP) as far north as the Sonoma County Airport, a distance of 43 miles. The NWP was the remainder of an early regional railroad created from lines originally formed by a joint effort of the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe from consolidation of 42 early short lines. Upgrading the track with new rail and concrete ties has produced a first class right of way. NWPco contracts to haul freight on the route. Plans exist to extend the route south to connect with the high speed ferryboats at Larkspur Landing and north to Cloverdale, making it a 70 mile run. It roughly parallels busy Highway 101, offering local people an alternative mode of travel.

SMART trains use Diesel Multiple Units (DMUs), built by Nippon Sharyo as two car sets that can be linked into longer trains. They are Tier IV emissions rated, with mechanical drive trains, so one can feel the transmission gear shifting as the train accelerates. Seating is 2 by 2, with some table seating, and a small snack bar in the center of one car of each set. Seats are large and comfortable, facing opposite directions at opposite ends of the car as is common on push-pull operations. WiFi is available and bicycles can be accommodated in hanging racks. New platforms at each stop are elevated to provide level access to the cars, making them handicap accessible. Since freight traffic also moves on the line this poses an interesting problem as the cars are too wide to clear the platforms. This was resolved



San Rafael, CA SMART DMU Train - Clyde Anderson photo



Santa Rosa, CA - SMART DMU Motorman's Console - Clyde Anderson photo





by gauntlet tracks on both sides of the platforms where two pairs of rails are interlaced with switches at each end so the freight cars can move on the outermost pair of rails and clear the platforms.

We rode the entire length of the route, then after a brief wait off the train, we reboarded and rode just a few miles south to Santa Rosa where we got off to enjoy lunch at nearby restaurants. The Santa Rosa platform is next to the historic stone depot from years ago, now home to the local welcome center and the Northwestern Pacific Railroad Museum. The SMART maintenance facility is on the other side of the tracks. After lunch we got back on a later train and soon were back in San Raphael. Our charter bus was waiting for us, and gave us a first-hand opportunity to see why rail transit is growing in popularity as we crept along in bumper to bumper traffic, often coming to a halt along much of the trip back to Richmond. We boarded another Capitol Corridor train for another swift and comfortable ride back to Sacramento.

I was impressed with the SMART DMU cars. They would be an excellent solution for Omaha to Lincoln commuter service. They are relatively inexpensive, offer great flexibility of operation, require few expensive line upgrades, and can coexist with freight operations.

That evening a welcome reception gave an opportunity to greet friends and meet new people. Roger Clark had arrived by that time.



Saturday morning the General Session opened with the theme “Creating Amtrak 2.0”. RPA President Jim Matthews noted that because of the good grass roots work by RPA members in the field, especially during the battle to save the Southwest Chief, and staff efforts to gather and disseminate information to members of congress and the Federal Railroad Administration, congress is now coming to RPA for information and advice about Amtrak!

California Council Representative Doug Kerr followed with “California Passenger Rail – 50 Years of Improvement”. Fifty years ago California was the land of automobiles and Los Angeles was the car capitol of the U.S. Today LA Union Station hosts 90 trains and over 100,000 passengers a day. Plans are in place for the station to support the new high speed rail system being built, the size of the underground passageways to the platforms is being doubled, and to make it a through track operation instead of a stub end terminal. California has three of the top five Amtrak corridor services, BART, five light rail systems, and SMART.

Jim Matthews returned to list some of the RPA successes of the past year. Thanks to the U.S. Supreme Court refusing to hear an appeal by the American Association of Railroads on behalf of the freight railroads of a lower court decision that the Federal Railroad Administration does have the authority to enforce the prioritization of passenger trains over freight, the FRA and Amtrak are now allowed to work together to develop metrics and standards for on-time performance. Saving the Southwest Chief was a huge victory that brought local political power from communities along all the western long distance routes to bear on congress to make them aware of the economic damage that would result from loss of those trains. RPA’s work has successfully induced congress to increase rail appropriations in each of the last several years. Amtrak is even starting to realize that RPA has much expertise to offer and is starting to listen.

RPA Vice President of Policy and Government Affairs, Sean Jeans-Gail, spoke of “Red Lines” RPA has drawn in dealings with Amtrak:

- Amtrak’s mission is public service, not profitability.
- Existing services must be preserved.
- New services must not be built by cannibalizing existing trains.
- Daily service is the minimum acceptable service level.
- Service levels must be maintained – “Death by a thousand cuts” is not acceptable.

RPA has found common ground with an Amtrak over their proposal for a new federal grant program to fund startup of new services in rapidly growing regions. Amtrak is willing to listen to RPA about which corridors are most important for development. They are using the results of a recent RPA member survey and FRA studies based on their “Connect” tool, software that has been proven to accurately predict economic benefits of improved transportation between population centers. Unfortunately, the Trump administration has specifically forbidden the FRA to continue to use this study tool or to publish its results. RPA is working to overturn this. Creating economic benefits is one thing all political factions can support.

Three concurrent sessions followed. I chose the “Making Change Happen” track. First up was Karen Christenson presenting “Rural Rail: Reforging the Essential Connection Between Cities and the Countryside”. Trains are essential to the economic health of rural areas by creating jobs there. China has proven that high technology jobs can exist in small communities with connections by high speed trains. Trains can also relieve the automobile congestion that is choking many large cities and are the most sustainable method. State and local DOTs are so stuck on roads that they have trouble comprehending other transportation solutions. Many excellent foreign models are available that we can use.

Robert Munson was next, proposing that conversion of many commuter railroads into regional railroads could lead to resurgence in passenger service. The problem is that in many places it is not legally possible to create the agencies necessary to support transit across political boundaries. He sees a place for the federal government to use its powerful “carrots and sticks” to enable regional systems. Regional rail can grow into corridor systems, which will lead to expansion of the national network.

The final presenter was Mike Christensen, President of the Utah Rail Passengers Association. He noted that Amtrak actually has three lines of business:

- The Northeast Corridor
- The long distance interstate routes
- Other corridors

There is a Utah Transit Authority that serves about 2.5 million people in a limited area, but the Utah DOT does not support transit. During discussion among the presenters a common theme was that local government fiefdoms in the U.S. create barriers to cross boundary transportation systems. Fighting the typical “roads only” mentality will take getting people to speak up to public officials and to show the economic benefits of transit as well as the costs.

After lunch there was another set of concurrent sessions, and I continued with the track “Making Change Happen” with another presentation by Doug Kerr titled “Be Heard and Make a Difference”. Since each of us is only one in about 391,000,000 Americans we feel like our voice does not matter. In fact, we get changes in national policy by convincing enough of our 435 congressmen and 100 senators to vote for our ideas, and relatively few people ever take time to write or talk to them. The same is true at the state and local levels. Even if you are not a constituent, your position as an RPA member makes you a representative of a large organization and gives you a voice. Bring them a clear, concise, focused message. RPA staff can provide useful information. Tell a personal story supporting your position. Make sure your facts are correct. Your audience is very good at spotting misinformation. Develop good relationships with congressional staffers who deal with transportation issues. Seek allies. Mayors (especially) and city administrators on Amtrak routes have a strong stake in RPA’s mission, and their opinions have a surprising amount of clout with state and national elected officials. Contact

these people periodically. Remind them when you visit that you have come on your own time and at your own expense because you believe your message is right for your country and/or state. You will have much more credibility than a paid lobbyist.

The General Session reconvened after the concurrent sessions, with a recap of what was discussed at all of them for the benefit of those who were at another session. Some of the highlights were the realization that Amtrak does make money, lots of it, but just not for Amtrak. The big benefits go to the towns it serves. Transit system ridership is not always highest on routes with large populations. Amtrak customers want high quality food service! Statistics on numbers of passengers per departure provide an accurate measure of train popularity, but Amtrak does not use that measurement. An Amtrak conductor and RPA member who was present said that Amtrak's biggest problem is its inability not to start every conversation with the word "NO"! Jim Matthews noted that, contrary to popular opinion, young people are politically active, but in non-traditional ways. They are very adept at expressing their opinions and raising money using social media.

Sunday morning the business meeting was opened by RPA President Jim Matthews. He reported on the many successes RPA has had in the past two years. RPA has proved to congress that trains provide economic benefits to served communities that are six to seven times the federal money invested. Wins have been made in all three branches of government. Infrastructure bills are popular across both aisles of congress and with the executive branch. We just need to push for a larger piece of the pie for rail. Getting to this point has been very expensive. Fortunately the RPA had been the beneficiary of a very large bequest several years ago from a deceased member that made it possible to undertake these productive efforts. RPA is now at a point where it has to increase its income in order to continue pressing forward at the pace that is needed.

Unfortunately, a couple of years ago the U.S. Postal Service managed to lose a large number of membership renewal forms. They were supposed to be forwarded to a "lockbox" where they would be picked up by RPA's bank and processed there, relieving RPA staff from having to deal with that routine task. It took two years to get the USPS to even investigate what had happened. In the meantime a number of former members did not renew. After that was resolved the bank itself managed to lose a number of renewals, causing further membership decline. RPA is changing banks, a move that will save the organization thousands of dollars a month in fees. A new marketing development person has been hired to seek out corporate sponsorships and other funding sources, and to do more effective membership recruiting. Her efforts so far have been very encouraging.

In order for RPA to continue being so effective we need to get the membership increased and more active at the local, state, and national levels, so please consider joining and helping as an active, participating member. Plans are in the works to change the meeting format for the fall to a number of regional meetings of shorter duration to reduce travel time and costs, to make it possible for more people to actively participate in the meetings.



There was a lot of discussion about the financial issues, and the staff and board were directed to keep future expenditures in line with revenues. Staff has already been in this mode. Other business included elections, committee reports, action on several changes to the bylaws, and on a few resolutions submitted by council members. None of them were particularly newsworthy. The conference was adjourned at 12:15 p.m.

I got done looking around in time to go for a ride on their Sacramento Southern excursion train that makes about a 40 minute trip south along the Sacramento River. It being close to Halloween, the train was decked out in spooky decorations and staffed by a “Skeleton Crew”. We even had two witches on board. The good witch gave everyone a cookie. Shortly thereafter the wicked witch showed up to try to steal our cookies, but was thwarted by the good witch. It is a nice scenic ride over some historic trackage on some old cars. They do have a steam locomotive that is used on special occasions, and operates out of a reproduction of the original CP train shed. I heartily recommend a visit to this exceptional museum.

Because of flight schedules and time zone issues I had to stay over on Sunday night. Since I had the afternoon mostly free I walked to the California State Railroad Museum, which is located in the historic Old Sacramento district where a number of buildings dating back to the 1850s still stand. The museum itself is a modern

building designed like a roundhouse. It is certainly one of the world-class railroad museums, housing many treasures dating back to the beginning of the first transcontinental railroad. One of the locomotives in display is Central Pacific #1, the C.P. Huntington, the first locomotive the CP owned! It is beautifully restored and resplendent in

bright red paint. A number of other locomotives and cars from many eras are on display, including Southern Pacific cab-forward steam locomotive #4294, a massive 4-8-4 beast. One of my favorites is Union Pacific 0-6-0 #4466, an old friend of mine that I used to watch shoving





cars around in Grand Island when I was a young boy. For many years it was used to power their excursion trains. They also have an extensive display of model trains and a train themed play area for young rail fans.

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