

More Amtrak trains coming to Harrisburg?

Discussions underway to add passenger service from Pittsburgh

By **Jason Scott**, May 27, 2016 at 3:00 AM



The Keystone Service — the third-largest state-supported passenger service in Amtrak's network — starts in Harrisburg and runs to New York City. - (Photo /Amy Spangler)

Amtrak's daily round-trip passenger train between Pittsburgh and New York City — a service that stops in Harrisburg — has been attracting more riders in recent years, prompting calls to expand service.

Amtrak reported that nearly 232,000 passengers rode the Pennsylvanian service last year, up from about 219,000 in 2013.

Imagine what two or three trains could do, say fans of expanding the service.

About 70 percent of the Pennsylvanian's passengers get on or off west of Harrisburg. Local business leaders think more trains would lead to more visitors and business for the state capital.

“Three trains a day isn't going to create a commutable service to Pittsburgh,” said Brad Jones, president and CEO of Harristown Enterprises Inc. “But what it does do is put Harrisburg in the center of a brisk intermodal system that allows us to have better connectivity for our customers and visitors.”

Nearly double traffic

In 2014, a study co-sponsored by the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership and the Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail found that three daily round-trips would nearly double passengers on the Pennsylvanian's nine-hour route, which travels from Pittsburgh through the midstate, over to Philadelphia and then to New York City.

The study, which relied on 2013 passenger data, projected annual ridership of 414,000 with three trains.

“There's a limit on how much it can go up with only one train,” said Lucinda Beattie, vice president of transportation for the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership.

There were two round trips up until about 2005.

Earlier this decade, the Pennsylvanian service was almost eliminated when federal regulations began requiring state subsidies on short-distance trips where passenger revenue didn't cover the costs.

But a \$3.8 million annual agreement between the commonwealth and Amtrak saved the service in 2013.

'Doable' project

Beattie said she knows it will be challenging to add more passenger service on the freight-heavy corridor, but she believes it is “doable.”

The project already is on the radar of Amtrak, the state Department of Transportation and other entities that would be affected by it.

“If reasonable, our hope is to make this work,” said Rick Kirkpatrick, a PennDOT spokesman.

PennDOT would need to work with Amtrak to study costs and assess future demand. Negotiations over capital improvements and route scheduling with Norfolk Southern Corp., owner of the line, are another potential hurdle.

The cost of adding locomotives and passenger cars was pegged at \$37 million to \$75

million in the 2014 study. And the state's support would need to go up to \$12.8 million per year, Beattie said.

PennDOT already provides about \$14 million per year to support the Pennsylvanian and its popular sister service to the east, the Keystone Service.

The Keystone Service — the third-largest state-supported passenger service in Amtrak's network — starts in Harrisburg and runs to New York City. It draws more than 1.3 million passengers per year.

“We continue to have discussions with the state of Pennsylvania and are working within our resources to expeditiously provide a thorough evaluation of additional service to Pittsburgh,” Amtrak spokesman Mike Tolbert said. “I do not at this point have a timetable.”

Challenges ahead

Norfolk Southern spokesman Dave Pidgeon said the railroad giant is listening but also conveying the challenges ahead.

He cited the cost of more trains as well as major public investments that would be needed to improve the rail lines.

Another cost would be for riding that allow trains to pull off the main line while other trains are coming. Additional main lines also could be needed.

Speed is another consideration, Pidgeon said. Freight trains don't travel faster than 60 miles per hour, so rail-bed maintenance would have to be altered to provide for more frequent and faster passenger trains.

“Any new passenger service can't interfere with current or future freight operations (on that line),” he added, calling the Pennsylvanian's route a significant supply line that connects the East Coast with Chicago and regions to the west.

Under a plan to cut annual costs by more than \$650 million by 2020, Norfolk Southern has also said it plans to “dispose of or downgrade 1,500 miles of secondary lines.” Freight traffic on those lines would be rerouted to higher-density lines — such as the one used by the Pennsylvanian.

Western workforce

Still, Beattie is optimistic and said benefits, including opportunities for development around stations west of Harrisburg, would outweigh the costs.

And there may be opportunity for public-private partnerships to help with infrastructure improvements, she said.

Jones, a former chairman of the Modern Transit Partnership in Harrisburg, a nonprofit organization that supports public transportation, sees benefits for Harrisburg in attracting not only more visitors and business customers but also talent. More eastbound trains from Pittsburgh might draw more people who want to work in the midstate, he said.

It also expands western access for Central Pennsylvanians, whether for business or leisure.