

Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee Public Hearing Testimony

Role, Benefits and Potential of Passenger Rail in Pennsylvania

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My name is Mark Spada, President of Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail (WPPR), a non-profit organization dedicated to the improvement and expansion of passenger rail service throughout western Pennsylvania. I am here to discuss the potential of enhanced passenger rail service in the Harrisburg-Pittsburgh corridor. On behalf of WPPR, thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present the following testimony.

Why passenger rail is important and beneficial to western Pennsylvania

- * It connects the state's two largest employment and business cities - Pittsburgh and Philadelphia – not only with each other, but also to the many smaller communities along the route of the *Pennsylvanian*. It makes economic sense for the state Pennsylvania to invest in the enhancement of the connection between those two cities and the intermediate locations.
- * Many of the locations west of Harrisburg served by the train have little or no intercity public transportation alternatives. For example, Huntington, home to Juniata College, has no bus or airline service. Increased passenger rail service would allow travelers to or from western Pennsylvania better access to the many commercial, recreational, medical and academic facilities and attractions located across the state.
- * Passenger rail can enhance economic development and community revitalization for the communities it serves. During the 2016 groundbreaking of the new station at Mount Joy, then Secretary of Transportation Leslie Richards said, “These improvements will further enhance the center of Mount Joy and help boost the borough’s ongoing revitalization plans. Transit plays a crucial role in building communities, and we have seen the results from more than a decade of upgrades to the Keystone Corridor.” These economic benefits can be achieved through increased passenger rail in western Pennsylvania as well.
- * Passenger rail provides affordable, easily-accessible, and environmentally-favorable transportation for all communities and citizens. Enhanced intercity rail service can be a significant positive factor in fighting climate change.

Current developments to increase service along the *Pennsylvanian* corridor

Norfolk Southern (NS), via an agreement with PennDOT, is presently conducting an internal study to determine its proposed infrastructure upgrades and operating parameters, and the associated costs, between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg (NS Pittsburgh line) for one additional daily *Pennsylvanian*. Hopefully, following the completion of the study, discussions between NS and PennDOT will culminate in an agreement to increase to western Pennsylvania. Previous studies have offered a wide range of infrastructure improvement costs, some totaling in the billions of dollars. WPPR believes that to achieve increased frequency the state should focus its attention on modest improvements in terms of cost and implementation time.

The following studies offer several alternatives that meet that objective.

1) The 2005 Keystone West Passenger Train Study conducted by Woodside Consulting outlined improvements for approximately \$111 million (around \$150 million in present dollars) to increase passenger service from two to four daily trains between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg. At the time, NS was operating over 100 freight trains daily along the route according to the study. Recent information offered by NS puts the number of daily freight trains on the Pittsburgh line at 60 -70. Adding one additional daily train as being studied by NS would thus basically increase service back to the level that was being handled successfully 15 years ago.

2) Further, the 2014 Keystone West High Speed Rail Study, which identified four costly alternatives for enhanced service, also included a Lower Cost Option estimated at \$457 million. Approximately \$300 million of that was for speed increases that reduced the Pittsburgh – Harrisburg time by a little over three minutes in each direction. We contend those reductions do not warrant that large an expenditure.

An agreement between NS and a state to initiate or increase passenger rail service along NS tracks has previously taken place. For example, in 2017 the state of Virginia began passenger rail service between Lynchburg and Roanoke, a segment that had not seen passenger trains since the inception of Amtrak in 1971. The new service was the result of an agreement between NS and Virginia that addressed infrastructure improvements and operating parameters.

Conclusion

Increasing passenger rail service between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg will provide greater mobility and improved economic development opportunities in a region lacking in non-automobile transportation choices. The results of the NS study will provide the railroad's proposed infrastructure improvements and associated costs for an additional passenger train. We look forward to the discussions that follow between NS and the state resulting in increased service to western Pennsylvania. WPPR thanks the Democratic Policy Committee for its continued interest in this subject and looks forward to the committee's on-going assistance and legislative support in achieving this goal. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail Background Information

WPPR's goal is to increase the number of passenger trains between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg (and points east) from the current one daily train to three trains. Our efforts to increase began in earnest in late 2012 with our advocating for the state to include Amtrak's Pittsburgh – New York (444 miles) *Pennsylvanian* in its operating support of Pennsylvania intercity passenger rail. The Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA) required states to fund the majority of operating expenses not covered by revenues for short-distance trains, trains whose routes are fewer than 750 miles, starting October 1, 2013. Beginning on that date, the state commenced providing support to the *Pennsylvanian* as well as continued funding the Harrisburg - Philadelphia Keystone Service trains as it had done for many years.

Since then, WPPR has advocated for increased service to western Pennsylvania through numerous presentations, public rallies, and letters of endorsement from the region's government, community and business entities, as well as previous testimony before other legislative committees in Harrisburg, Pittsburgh and Altoona. We have provided information and data for the *Pennsylvanian* showing strong previous (two daily trains until 2005) and on-going ridership figures, average speeds competitive with, and in several cases faster than, other state-supported trains, and train capacity numbers among the highest on the Amtrak system. This data suggests there is not only significant demand for the existing daily train, but also considerable unmet demand for additional service. Based on previous ridership for two daily trains as well as the experience of other state-supported routes, WPPR has maintained that the fastest and most cost effective way to increase ridership is to focus on increasing the frequency of the existing service and the associated infrastructure improvements.