

Testimony

Pennsylvania House Transportation Committee Public Hearing

Keystone West Passenger Train Services Improvements

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Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail (WPPR) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the improvement and expansion of passenger rail service throughout western Pennsylvania. On behalf of WPPR, thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present the following testimony regarding service enhancements between Pittsburgh, Harrisburg and additional eastern destinations.

The Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 required states to fund the operating expenses not covered by ticket and other revenues of short-distance trains, trains whose routes are fewer than 750 miles, starting in October 2013. This included Amtrak's *Pennsylvanian* which runs between New York, Philadelphia, Harrisburg and Pittsburgh with stops at several intermediate western and central Pennsylvania communities. A funding agreement was reached in March 2013 between Pennsylvania and Amtrak that secured the continued operation of the once-daily train. Subsequent state funding of the *Pennsylvanian*, primarily provided through Act 89, has allowed successful on-going operation of the train. WPPR is now encouraging the House Transportation Committee to support the operation of three daily trains along the route of the *Pennsylvanian* and direct PennDOT to include that among its priorities.

Much of the impetus driving the 2013 agreement was an outpouring of support for the *Pennsylvanian* received by state legislators, the governor's office and PennDOT from citizens, public officials, the business community, colleges and organizations such as WPPR. That support has not only continued, but in fact grown in calling for three daily trains. Letters of support for three trains, letters not only written in Pittsburgh and Harrisburg, but also in the numerous intermediate towns, have been sent to the governor and the Secretary of Transportation. Public officials, the business community, chambers of commerce, colleges, government planning entities, and organizations such as WPPR from Allegheny County, Pittsburgh, Westmoreland County, Johnstown, Cambria County, Blair County, Mifflin County

and Harrisburg, among other locales, have strongly endorsed three trains. They are all convinced expanded passenger rail service will enhance the opportunities for improved mobility and stronger economic development in their regions. The explanation for their confidence is based upon several reasons starting with the popularity of the existing daily train.

In fiscal year 2015, the *Pennsylvanian* carried 231,720 riders, a 26% increase since 2006, the first full year where service along the route had been reduced from two daily trains to one. That impressive ridership gain has resulted in the train achieving among the highest capacity utilization figures, the percentage of available seats used by passengers, of any of Amtrak's routes. For example, through the first nine months of FY 2016, the *Pennsylvanian's* capacity number of 65% is second only to the highly successful Washington – Lynchburg, VA route among all state-supported trains as calculated using information available in Amtrak's June 2016 monthly performance report.

The high capacity number of the train further indicates there is significant unmet demand for service based upon the average trip length on the *Pennsylvanian* of 232 miles in FY 2015. That distance is most closely equivalent to a trip between New York and Lewistown or Philadelphia and Altoona. Because seats are often reserved by riders boarding east of Harrisburg, for example by Lancaster – New York travelers, passengers whose origins are west of Harrisburg cannot purchase tickets since seats along the eastern portion of their trip are already reserved. Six of the top ten city-pairs for ridership on the *Pennsylvanian* in FY 2015, according to figures from the National Association of Railroad Passengers, show a town west of Harrisburg as the origin or destination. And this does not just mean Pittsburgh. Johnstown, for example, is listed among two of those ten city-pairs. Increased frequency would allow riders who presently cannot purchase a ticket more seats and travel from which to choose.

Further, increased service frequency on Amtrak routes across the country has resulted in significant ridership increases and would be the most important factor in increasing ridership along the *Pennsylvanian's* route. Virginia, where new service to Roanoke will commence in 2017, and North Carolina are nearby states where expanded service has led to large ridership gains. An excellent example exists right here in Pennsylvania with the Harrisburg – Philadelphia/New York *Keystone Service* trains, a route that for decades has been supported by Pennsylvania. Since the state completed infrastructure improvements along the route in 2006/2007 to accommodate expanded service, ridership has soared. Between 2003, when there

were nine daily weekday trains, and 2015 with 13 daily trains, a 44% increase, ridership rose from 886,003 to 1,359,615 passengers, a 53% increase. A report developed by Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership in collaboration with WPPR, *On Track to Accessibility*, says a conservative figure of approximately 414,000 annual riders on the *Pennsylvanian*'s route would initially occur with three daily trains.

The anticipated ridership gain through increased frequency is also supported by the lack of other transportation alternatives for the western Pennsylvania communities along the route. They have minimal or non-existent bus or air service, thus making it difficult to access the towns by any means besides automobile. This has limited the mobility choices for many residents and hampered efforts to promote economic development and tourism.

Besides increased frequency, programs are available to help increase ridership. The state has partnered with Amtrak in creating PA Trips By Train, a program that promotes excursions that combine reduced rail ticket fares and destination/event promotions. Additionally, Thruway Bus service that offers combined bus and train travel through one ticket, is available throughout the Amtrak system including in Philadelphia to Scranton. These efforts have contributed to the *Keystone Service* becoming a highly desirable transportation alternative. The state can achieve the same success on the *Pennsylvanian*'s route by implementing similar operating and marketing initiatives.

The data presented in this testimony illustrates the successful performance and use of the *Pennsylvanian*. Also, Pennsylvania has shown its ability to improve and expand passenger rail service that results in significant ridership gains. Based on an already strong and steadily growing use of the *Pennsylvanian*, WPPR is confident similar goals can be achieved along the Pittsburgh – Harrisburg (and east) corridor. Please visit WPPR's website, www.wpprrail.org, for more information. Thank you for your time and consideration.