

Pennsylvania Senate Transportation Committee Public Hearing - June 4, 2021

Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission

Mark Spada, President, Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail

Good morning. My name is Mark Spada, President of Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail (WPPR), a non-profit, volunteer 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.

Many of the on-going efforts to improve the safety of and alternatives for the transportation of people and goods have focused either on movement within an urban area or long-distance vehicular operation, both personal and commercial. However, the same level of interest and focus has not been directed to non-automobile intercity transportation, particularly for traveling to or from smaller towns and rural areas. In Pennsylvania, this lack of transportation services has left many locations with little or no intercity public transportation alternatives. As a result, these small cities and towns are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to not only making direct use of transportation innovations, but also economic development, tourism, downtown revitalization and transportation alternatives for area residents. The potential long-term problems of limited mobility are magnified by Federal Highway Administration statistics showing the percentage of the population licensed to drive has decreased significantly since the mid-1980s (greencarcongress.com).

An immediate way to address these issues is through enhanced passenger rail service. Pennsylvania does have a history of dedicating interest and resources towards passenger service as shown by the improvements to the Harrisburg – Philadelphia Keystone Line. Infrastructure upgrades, new or renovated stations, and increased train frequency have resulted in a substantial increase in ridership over the last 15 years. 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.”

Further, Amtrak’s recently released plan for 2035, *Amtrak’s Vision for Improving Transportation Across America*, envisions 15 new round trips for Pennsylvania, including new

Scranton – New York, Allentown – New York and Reading – Philadelphia service, an additional Cleveland – Buffalo trip via Erie, and an added New York – Pittsburgh train with potential continuing service to Cleveland. These new or enhanced services would not only benefit the routes' endpoints, but also the intermediate stops the trains would serve. Pennsylvania could further increase the accessibility of an expanded passenger rail network by implementing additional connecting bus service to those communities not directly on a rail line.

With a mix of urban, small town and rural transportation needs similar to Pennsylvania's, Virginia is an excellent example of a state that has been a leader in addressing transportation needs through improved passenger rail that Pennsylvania can emulate. To elevate its commitment to, among other issues, passenger rail, the state established the Department of Rail and Public Transportation, reporting directly to the Secretary of Transportation, as a separate entity whose mission includes facilitating and improving the mobility of its citizens. Virginia further backed its belief of passenger rail by coming to agreements with Norfolk Southern (NS) to help fund infrastructure improvements that led to new service to Roanoke in 2017 and will enable increased service to Roanoke and new service west to Christiansburg in 2025. This was beyond previous new and expanded service to Newport News and Norfolk.

Virginia's experience in its legislative and administrative approach to passenger rail is of particular interest to Pennsylvania. NS, through an agreement with PennDOT, is presently conducting an internal feasibility study, due for completion this summer, to determine proposed infrastructure upgrades and operating parameters, and the associated costs, between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg for one additional daily *Pennsylvanian*. Hopefully, following the completion of the study, discussions between NS and PennDOT will culminate in an agreement to increase service to western Pennsylvania. Such an agreement could be used as a blueprint for adding new service elsewhere in the state as identified in Amtrak's plan.

Beyond allowing more Pennsylvania communities greater opportunities to experience and implement new transportation innovations, passenger rail can also make use of new technology for its own operation. For example, battery operated engines being developed by Pittsburgh-based Wabtec could enable passenger trains to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Enhanced and expanded passenger rail will provide Pennsylvanians increased mobility, reduced vehicle congestion, greater access to and use of new transportation innovations, and improved opportunities for economic development and community revitalization.