



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF RAILROAD PASSENGERS

Vol. 22, No. 10 Oct.-Nov., 1988

John R. Martin, Pres.; Eugene Skoropowski, Vice Pres.; Robert Glover, Sec.; Joseph Horning Jr., Treas.; Ross Capon, Exec. Dir.; Barry Williams, Asst. Dir.; Jane Colgrove, Membership Dir.; Harriet Parcels, Transp. Assoc.

National Association of Railroad Passengers News (ISSN 0739-3490), is published monthly except November by NARP, 236 Massachusetts Ave., NE, Suite 603, Washington, DC 20002. 202/546-1550. Membership dues are \$15/year (\$7.50 under 21 or over 65) of which \$4 is for a subscription to NARP News. Second-class postage paid at Washington, DC.

Postmaster: send address changes to National Association of Railroad Passengers, 236 Massachusetts Ave., NE, Suite 603, Washington, DC 20002.

(This has news through September 28. No. 9 was mailed September 13.)

RETURN REQUESTED

If Bush Wins. . .

(This is the second of 2 articles examining how the cause of balanced transportation might fare under the major presidential candidates. See also our July article on Gov. Dukakis.)

If Vice President George Bush becomes president, he probably would be more supportive of Amtrak than Reagan has been. We base this on one of 2 published Bush statements on Amtrak, the 3 transportation pages in the Bush-controlled Republican Platform, and our Sep. 28 phone conversation with Rob Quartel, a Bush senior domestic policy adviser.

The platform says of Amtrak: "Year by year since 1981, Amtrak operations have shown improvement. Amtrak's ratio of revenues to costs stood at 48% in 1981. Last year, 65% of the costs were covered by revenues. Fiscal year 1988 will see the ratio pushing 70%. We recognize that inter-city rail passenger service plays an important role in our transportation system. At the same time, we support continued reductions in public subsidies."

Bush, in the Aug. 11 *Travel Agent Magazine*, makes similar statements and adds: "Budget pressures being what they are, we will need to look to both public and the private sectors for future financing."

Quartel said Bush is "extremely cognizant of the issue—he's heard about it from many people. He is supportive of passenger rail and strongly supports an integrated, comprehensive transportation system, but he does not believe the amount of federal money one advocates reflects the extent of one's commitment. He believes we will need to find very innovative ways to finance infrastructure improvements."

This is a big improvement over Pres. Reagan's ridicule of Amtrak and his calls to kill federal support immediately, but it is not clear how Amtrak could avoid a reversal of the positive trends the platform praises if Federal support is reduced further. The present level of capital spending is already too low to permit long-term survival of all present Amtrak service.

NARP agrees Amtrak should get all the private funds it can, but prospects should not be exaggerated. The recent coach order (May News) was based on Amtrak's best chance for private funding of badly-needed new cars: Northeast Corridor capacity increases (because demand at high fares is great thanks to good tracks and an abundance of connecting local rail services). Bombardier, the manufacturer, assisted with financ-

ing, but even this was not private money: financing came from the Export Development Corporation, an agency of the Canadian government.

Except for mail cars, private financing of new cars gets progressively tougher as one looks at Amtrak's other services.

We suspect the level of public funding one favors for Amtrak is a measure of one's support. After all, Amtrak competes with highways and aviation for which government funding is massive and getting bigger. NARP does not believe we can have

(continued on page 4)

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Amtrak will establish a Dallas-Houston section for its Chicago-San Antonio "Eagle" on Nov. 15, over Southern Pacific Railroad. Intermediate stops: Corsicana, College Station, TX.

Watch out! Northbound "San Joaquin" connecting buses depart Los Angeles 2:50 AM and 1:05 PM—not 3:15 AM and 1:10 PM as per Amtrak's national timetable, p. 56.

Effective with Amtrak's Sep. 18 timetable:

- Two additional New York-Washington Metroliners operate Saturdays, Sundays.

- Chicago-Seattle/Portland "Empire Builder" schedule is lengthened by :45 westbound, to compensate for Soo Line Railroad track work. (:90 was added to eastbound schedule May 15, but no time was added westbound then—see Apr. News.)

- Los Angeles-Seattle "Coast Starlight" schedule keeps its extra :30 added for the summer months, to improve reliability.

- Seattle-Salt Lake City "Pioneer" no longer stops at Cascade Locks, OR; Cache Jct., UT. Los Angeles-Salt Lake "Desert Wind" drops Delta, UT.

Off-peak All Aboard America Fares are back, for travel between Oct. 1, 1988, and May 25, 1989: \$149 for 1 zone, \$199 for 2 zones, \$249 for all 3 zones; same conditions (3 destinations, 45 days of travel, etc.) \$7 Return Fare is also back for same period, wherever single-route fare is \$65 or more.

Amtrak Struggles to Restore Fallen Service Quality

Americans are rediscovering the rails. Amtrak passenger-miles, revenues, and cost-recovery are at record levels. 1988 ridership may surpass Amtrak's all-time high of 21.4 million, set in gasoline-scarce 1979; Amtrak's revenue-cost ratio in 1988 will beat the intended goal of 67%.

Countless people are still enjoying their rides. Mr. Donald Maushund of Michigan, in an Aug. 2 letter, called his recent Amtrak trip to Las Vegas "the nicest thing my wife and I have ever done."

But NARP Member Robert Bellinger of California said that, on his May-June trip to Chicago, he had "never heard so many people saying this was not only their first trip via Amtrak, but probably their last."

Train reliability is declining and there are problems on board many trains.

Why the Trouble?

Certainly, budget cuts have squeezed Amtrak's maintenance budget and prevented the acquisition of new rolling stock for fleet replacement and expansion. Some believe Amtrak's response to the budget cuts overemphasized quickly raising the revenue-cost ratio while equipment maintenance fell short. Speaking to the NARP Board in April, Amtrak Executive Vice Pres.—Marketing & Business Development William Norman emphasized the company's decision to make improving the revenue-cost ratio its top goal.

In addition, changes in the rail freight industry have encouraged many railroads to pay less attention to the on-time reliability of Amtrak trains.

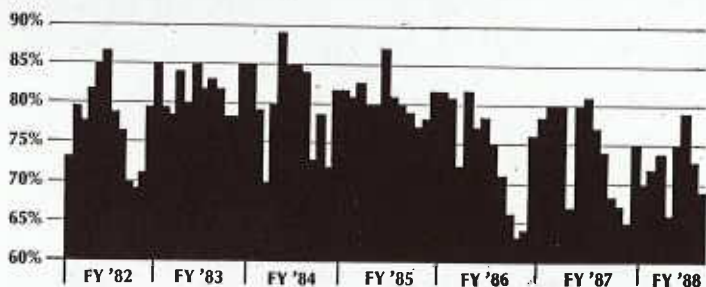
In any event, many observers have noted a growing gap between marketing promises and service reality. Clearly, this must be reversed.

Late Trains

Amtrak's on-time performance rose dramatically as new and rebuilt equipment was introduced in the early 1980s—from 57% in FY 1979 to 79% in FY 1982. For 3 years, punctuality remained good: 82%, 80%, and 81% of trains were on time in 1983-84-85, respectively. Then, trouble: 74% in 1986 and 1987. An even lower percentage is expected this year.

At the July meeting of the Amtrak Board, Chairman W. Graham Claytor Jr. said June's on-time performance was a poor 64%—down nearly 4 points from the previous June—and trains outside the Boston-Washington Northeast Corridor were only 54% on-time, which Claytor termed "sort of a disaster!"

AMTRAK SYSTEM TRAIN RELIABILITY
(% of Trains Operating On Time, By Month)



—Barry Williams/NARP Graphics

NOTE: Amtrak uses the federal fiscal year (FY): Oct. 1 through Sep. 30. Trains are considered "on time" if they arrive within 5 minutes of schedule for each 100 miles traveled—up to a maximum of 30 minutes late. Thus, a train traveling 300 miles is allowed :15 before it is "late"; a train traveling 1000 miles is "late" after :30.

Western long-distance trains had a particularly rough summer. The eastbound "Southwest Chief" from Los Angeles averaged 3 hours late into Chicago July 6-19. The southbound "Eagle" from Chicago, already scheduled into St. Louis and San Antonio around midnight, regularly arrived even later due to bad Chicago, Missouri & Western (CM&W) tracks. With the northward trip leaving San Antonio at 7:20 AM the next morning, on-board crews often got virtually no rest between trips.

Some reasons why trains run late in the summer:

- In the northern half of the U.S. (roughly speaking, north of Washington-St. Louis-San Francisco), reliability always suffers somewhat during the warmer months since track maintenance must be concentrated then.

- Extraordinarily hot weather can provoke temporarily-lowered speed limits for safety anywhere, as welded rail can expand beyond acceptable tolerance, causing heat-related alignment problems. Most railroads impose the restrictions at 90° F. At 95° F, Amtrak cuts its Northeast Corridor speed limits to 80 mph, from a top of 125 mph (37 days this summer vs. 24 last year).

- Most trains are most heavily used during the summer, so delays at stations (including double- and sometimes triple-stops due to longer trains) and from lower horsepower-to-weight ratios are also common.

Except for the extent of this summer's heat-related speed restrictions, the above 3 factors were not new in 1988. It was the addition of the following factors that made this year "special" in a way Amtrak and its friends would like to forget:

- Delays stemming from deteriorated track, especially Chicago-St. Louis and Milwaukee-St. Paul.

- "San Diegan" trackwork disruptions at the height of the summer travel season. 1989 on-time performance should improve, thanks to night-time track work and adjusted schedules.

- Freight train interference. Freight railroads, under heavy pressure from government-subsidized truck competition and from costs government imposes on railroads but not their competitors, have continued to abandon track, concentrating traffic flows on fewer lines. August was the 19th consecutive month in which overall U.S. rail freight traffic rose. (However, it fell 3.3% on Santa Fe, where "Southwest Chief" reliability was particularly bad.)

One problem has no solution: economic efficiency requires most freights to run without a caboose. Caboose-less freights, however, are vulnerable to longer en-route delays than freights with cabooses, since crew walking along the stopped train to find a problem car start from one end rather than both ends of the train. Thus, freights using Amtrak's Northeast Corridor between 7 AM and 10 PM are required to carry cabooses.

- Signal failures, especially Boston-Albany and in Michigan, where new signal installations have been nightmares for Conrail. (Fortunately, Amtrak learned of this in time to ax plans to install the same system between Springfield, MA, and New Haven, CT.)

- Malfunctioning locomotives and cars. A locomotive breakdown often means no electricity on the train (except for emergency lights) and no air conditioning. For many passengers who could otherwise take delays in stride, a long wait on a hot train is the last straw.

What are the Solutions?

- **Fix the tracks.** This will be a state responsibility so long as the federal government ignores the needs. Fortunately, the threat of rerouted Chicago-St. Louis and Chicago-St. Paul Amtrak services (May News) raised the awareness of Illinois and Wisconsin state officials. Illinois is providing \$14 mill. to upgrade CM&W tracks and has formed a task force to study



Next year, Amtrak will receive 2 new General Motors F69 diesel locomotives, intended to be prototypes (except as to body styling) for the generation of diesels that will eventually replace Amtrak's F40 fleet. One feature passengers may appreciate: the inverter supplying power to the rear 2 axles can provide electric power for the train if the regular "head end power" inverter fails.

intercity rail passenger needs statewide (NARP Reg. 7 Dir. Ken Bird of Woodridge is a member).

Sen. Bob Kasten's (R-WI) work produced federal money to augment Soo Line's track repair program. The Senate approved \$8 mill.—not \$10 mill. as we reported (July News, p. 4)—and House-Senate appropriations conferees reduced this to \$6 mill. Actual Milwaukee-St. Paul running-times should be reduced each succeeding winter, but summer interference from track work will continue at different locations for several years.

In the long run, of course, we need a change in federal policy toward trucks and trains (see "Truck Subsidies Big and Growing," Apr. '86 News).

● **Fix the trains.** Amtrak learned the size of its FY '86 federal grant more than 2 months into the fiscal year. To absorb those cuts, emergency service cuts took effect Jan. 12, 1986, to the dismay of NARP and others, and maintenance was also cut. Amtrak Pres. Claytor said at the time the service cuts were "too little, too late."

Asked in a Senate hearing Mar. 6, 1987, how he might cut costs, Claytor said he would not cut maintenance again. Referring to his FY '86 experience, he said: "I was nervous about [cutting maintenance] but we were stuck with no money, so we did it. It was a bad mistake that cost us more than we saved. Under no circumstances would I do that again. I'll cut the service before I'll do that."

In FY '86, a key measure of maintenance, miles between heavy overhauls, was allowed to rise above one million miles for some F40 locomotives (Amtrak's standard diesels). Amtrak later decided to cut it back to the manufacturer-approved 850,000-mile level, but the large number of units, and the fact that they are in tight supply, meant many F40s still had over one million post-overhaul miles as late as last December.

In a 3-hour Sep. 8 meeting involving 4 top Amtrak executives and the NARP leadership, Amtrak indicated all F40s will be under 850,000 miles by year's end and under 750,000 eventually. Attending the meeting were Amtrak's Graham Claytor and William Norman, Exec. Vice Pres. & Chief Operating Officer Dennis Sullivan, and Vice Pres.-Transportation Robert VanderClute; NARP Pres. John Martin, Vice Pres. Eugene Skoropowski, Exec. Dir. Ross Capon, and Asst. Dir. Barry Williams.

Similarly, many cars have gone 8 years without a major overhaul and Amtrak expects to get that down to 4 by 1990. Amtrak is setting up modern assembly lines to meet its annual goals of overhauling 85 Superliners and 100 Heritage cars at Beech Grove and 150 Amfleet cars at Bear, DE. The Amfleet line has been operating since November, 1987. Amtrak believes this

has already shown positive results.

Amtrak's Brighton Park, IL, Shop, once used for turbotrain maintenance, reopened June 1 handling 120-day maintenance for Chicago-based cars. This leaves more room in Chicago for daily running inspections and repairs.

Getting and keeping the entire car fleet on firm 120-day and overhaul schedules should reduce future "down time" and reduce the risky practice of "stealing" cars scheduled for preventive maintenance and pressing them back into service.

To speed up work, parts inventory procedures at the shops are being simplified and paperwork reduced.

Amtrak's Dennis Sullivan has told NARP that Amtrak's older locomotives must be replaced "in the next 5 or 6 years," and that orders should be placed "in the next 3 or 4 years."

Some relief will come sooner. 2 diesels (F69s) and 7 electrics (AEM7s) are being built for Amtrak. Amtrak was the successful bidder for 8 used diesels. Also, Amtrak began the year with 12 diesels sidelined for "wreck repairs"; that is now down to 5 and should drop to 0 by the end of December.

● **Correct toilet problems.** Amtrak is redesigning the toilets on Amfleet I cars using all-stainless steel and eliminating the plastic shroud which retains unpleasant odors. In addition, Amtrak is increasing the frequency with which these cars' toilet tanks are pumped out. This is a costly, time-consuming process required only on this type of equipment, but needs to be performed regularly.

As of Sep. 3, Amtrak began pumping in San Diego the cars that spend the night there rather than depending on having them pumped when they are turned in Los Angeles—something that didn't always happen when trains ran late.

Similarly, in early September Amtrak rearranged forces at Albany to insure that the 2 Canadian trains are pumped there in both directions. (The trains are also pumped overnight in Montreal and Toronto but not at New York's Grand Central Terminal.) Finally, problems—including road access for toilet-servicing trucks—which apparently prevented reliable pumping at Springfield, MA, have been solved.

In the future, any Amfleet I toilet problems should be confined almost exclusively to peak-period situations where, due to late trains, there's a crowd jamming the station waiting to leave, and Amtrak makes a "judgment call" that the equipment can make one more trip before pumping rather than force the crowd to wait (in some cases as much as 90 minutes) while the train is pumped.

Superliner cars present a different problem: a prohibited item such as a paper towel deposited in one Superliner toilet can knock out the car's entire toilet system. It's usually not difficult to remove the obstruction, but the procedure isn't especially pleasurable. When toilets become clogged, crews often respond by locking the restrooms. On-board personnel are being trained to clear obstructions, and Amtrak management believes that job will get done. Superliner toilets are being modified during overhauls to further improve their operation.

● **Fill the water tanks.** Amtrak is reassessing the intervals between watering points in light of today's heavier passenger loads. Amtrak has discovered, and is working on, a problem involving pumps that transfer water between two tanks in the Amfleet II cars.

● **Fix electrical connections.** Trains' on-board electric power is distributed from car to car by means of 480-volt cables which plug into receptacles at the ends of each car. Amtrak is installing receptacle locks to hold the power cables more firmly in place and prevent them from accidentally disconnecting en route. The Amtrak Board has approved funding to install locks on the first 228 cars.

● **Eliminate Rodents.** This year's apparent increase in on-board rodents—the subject of a July 19 NARP letter to Amtrak—evidently resulted from Amtrak's switching to a less dangerous and somewhat less effective fumigant chemical without adequately checking to see that the right amount of the chemical was used, and without extending the length of time the cars are closed to permit the fumigant to work. Amtrak says this has been corrected, in consultation with its pest-control contractor, Orkin. Amtrak also has begun (!) cleaning up facilities such as commissaries, shops, and yards, in order to eliminate nesting areas; this includes removal of weeds and vegetation.

● **Get After the Railroads.** Amtrak must devote more effort than in the past to "riding herd" on the railroads to see that they give Amtrak trains the right priority and that dispatchers make good decisions.

High Marks for On-Board Crews

Happily, one major aspect of passenger service is not generating many complaints this summer: on-board service (OBS) employees. In most of the complaint letters we have received, passengers had good things to say about OBS personnel.

After a 6900-mile Amtrak trip in July, NARP Member James Bradley wrote us that "coach attendant service . . . averaged positive. Sleeping car porter was courteous and helpful. . . ." Ms. Betty Wilkerson wrote: ". . . the very good things we encountered [on Amtrak included] excellent food, courteous employees, and especially a train attendant, David Lilly. Mr. Lilly was kind and helpful even under the stressful conditions taking place. He never once answered rude and belligerent passengers in a sharp or negative way. In retrospect, he was the only thing . . . that kept my husband and myself from becoming nasty."

Many of the remaining employee problems should disappear if Amtrak can solve the above problems that unnecessarily add to job stress.

Needed: Capital Funding, Quality Control

In the long run, none of the above actions will substitute for the capital funding that Amtrak continues to need and continues to live largely without. But—if all the solutions Amtrak is working on are executed successfully and consistently—Amtrak next summer could turn out a product we'd all be proud to recommend to our friends.

We plan to meet with Amtrak next March to get an update on progress in preparing for summer 1989, after which we will report further in *NARP News*.

(Pinpointing "what really needs to be done" is not easy. We welcome comments from Amtrak passengers and employees who feel this story overlooks important points. We prefer signed letters but of course would respect any requests that writers' identities be kept confidential.)

Bush (continued from page 1)

balanced transportation without balanced federal transportation spending.

Moreover, September *Conde Nast's Traveler* (p. 32) contained the following passage:

"CNT: What is your position on railroad subsidies? How would you make passenger train service a more viable part of the nation's travel network?

"BUSH: Last year, Congress reduced one proposed budget for the Coast Guard, the lead agency keeping drug smugglers from our shores, by \$72 million to provide more money for Amtrak. Let me tell you, Congressional priorities are badly out

of whack when they cut back on narcotics enforcement that would help all America, to provide more money for subsidizing trains that would help, at best, a few in America."

Quartel said a Bush-Quayle staffer filled out CNT's questionnaire from existing issue statements. The answer was accurate, since, given an Amtrak-vs.-drug-interdiction choice, the vice president preferred the latter. But, said Quartel, this choice didn't reflect Bush's overall budget priorities, so the answer was inappropriate. Quartel said that, when he learned what had gone to CNT, he asked CNT to wait for a better statement, but was told after it was rushed there that it was too late.

On other transportation matters it appears Bush would follow Reagan's policies—good and bad.

The platform deserves credit for this: "We will not abandon the economic flexibility that has so enormously strengthened the health of our railroads and so powerfully benefitted the American economy." In fact, White House pressure on Republican senators is credited with the rail freight industry's narrow 10-9 victory on Sep. 20 as the Senate Commerce Committee voted down a reregulation provision offered by Jay Rockefeller (D-WV).

Notwithstanding the platform's reference to "enormously strengthened health," rail freight is still in trouble. From 1980 to 1987, rail freight revenues and ton-mileage rose 2% and 4%, respectively, while that for intercity trucks rose 43% and 20%. Moreover, truckload traffic (trucks most competitive with rail) rose 75%.

We've heard no politician eager to end big-truck subsidies. However, on other issues relevant to the railroads' financial health—primarily the need to kill the Federal Employers' Liability Act (FELA) and to thwart attempts at rate reregulation—Republican instincts seem superior.

References to mass transit in the platform and *Travel Agent Magazine* are confined to praise for public-private cooperation; there is no indication DOT's vendetta against rail transit would end under Bush.

The platform also appears to support continued mode-specific funding, which NARP sees as a major obstacle to balanced transportation: "We advocate greater local autonomy in decision-making concerning the Highway Trust Fund and the Airport and Airway Trust Fund, and we oppose diversion of their resources to other purposes."

This—combined with new Amtrak funding cuts—would continue the federal government's present role of distorting state and local investment in favor of air and road facilities even where rail could do the job better. Most states will not consider rail seriously if it means forfeiting federal transportation dollars, all of which are earmarked for non-rail uses.

In a similar vein, the platform reflects a sharp contrast between an active federal role in aviation and a passive role in high-speed rail development: "The federal government and local communities must work together to develop additional airport capacity of all types. . . . Development of high-speed rail systems to meet the needs of inter-city travel should be encouraged." It is not likely that non-monetary "encouragement" is going to produce anything more than minimal use of the rail mode, if that.

(Quartel said NARP would get a comprehensive Bush transportation statement in early Oct. To get a copy, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to NARP.)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Write to Vice President Bush. If you are a Republican, say so! If you admire anything else Bush has done or said, say so! Then, deal with transportation.