

News from the

National Association of Railroad Passengers

March 1996

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'97 Clinton Budget Good on Amtrak Capital

President Clinton's detailed budget for fiscal year 1997, which begins October 1, 1996, would increase Amtrak and transit funding 22% and 6%, respectively, above 1996 levels. Both figures actually are down from fiscal 1995, but in the current climate they are good news.

Congress, obviously, will not rubber-stamp the Clinton budget. In fact, some Republican Congressional leaders called it dead on arrival but it's too early to tell which parts are dead. One good omen: Amtrak got its warmest reception in recent years at its recent, annual appearance before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, on March 13.

Evidently, Amtrak has had some success in getting across its message about the need for more capital investment both

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INTERNATIONAL STILL ON TRACK



—Michael L. Shermetta

After the Michigan Transportation Commission voted last September to cut funding for the Chicago-Lansing-Toronto *International*, to reduce service from daily to four days a week, and to eliminate food service, Amtrak evaluated its options and made positive changes.

Amtrak retained daily service, reassigned bi-level (Superliners and ex-Santa Fe Hi-Level cars) equipment to the train, and kept food service. Bi-level cars can be used since the Canadian National completed a new tunnel between Port Huron, MI and Sarnia, ON in March 1995. The new *International* is shown above during the U.S. Customs stop at Port Huron on November 28, with an F-40 locomotive owned by VIA Rail Canada (joint operator of the train).

Michigan DOT told the Transportation Commission in December that altering the *International's* operations—including frequency, route (June '95 *News*), and replacing Amtrak as the operator—would be counterproductive. The Commission approved that recommendation in January.

Also last fall, the state restored daily service to the Chicago-Grand Rapids *Pere Marquette*.

CLINTON'S TRANSPORTATION BUDGET

Fiscal Year 1997
Compared with Current Levels
Appropriations (\$ millions)

	1997	1997	1996	Clinton 1997	
	Amtrak Request	Clinton Request		vs. Enacted in 1996	vs. Enacted in 1995
Administration					
Federal Highway	—	19,400	19,970	- 3 %	- 2 %
Federal Aviation	—	8,250	8,216	+ 0 %	- 2 %
Federal Transit	—	4,300	4,051	+ 6 %	- 7 %
U.S. Coast Guard	—	3,800	3,375	+ 13 %	+ 4 %
Federal Railroad	—	1,050	874	+ 20 %	-10 %
*Amtrak + N.E. Corr.	1,066	919	750	+ 22 %	- 8 %

*These numbers also in Federal Railroad Administration total.

Intercity Rail Passenger Categories

Amtrak:	1996	1997	1996	1996	1997
* Operations	250	200	285	- 30 %	-49 %
Capital	360	297	230	+ 29 %	+29 %
** Mandatory payments	142	142	120	+ 18 %	+ 5 %
Northeast Corridor	314	280	115	+143 %	+40 %
High Speed Rail	—	27	24	+ 10 %	+17 %
TOTAL	1,066	945	774	+ 22 %	- 7 %

* 1996 operating figure includes \$100 million earmarked for "transition costs" related to Amtrak restructuring, service cuts, equipment retirement. Unspecified transition costs are included in operations in 1995 and 1997.

** Federal railroad retirement and unemployment insurance costs in excess of Amtrak's demands on system, therefore not part of true cost of operating Amtrak system. Amtrak is requesting this as a separate, non-subsidy item.

Rail Safety Takes Center Stage

CSX-operated MARC commuter train 286 ran a red signal and directly hit a locomotive fuel tank on Amtrak's *Capitol Limited* in Silver Spring, MD, on February 16, killing eight passengers and the three crew members on the commuter train. The wreck was particularly tragic because only three died from impact; the others were burned or overcome by smoke.

Two New Jersey Transit commuter trains collided February 9 at Secaucus, killing both engineers and a passenger.

Both passenger crashes involved "push-mode" trains (i.e., the engineer, seated in a cab car at the front of the train, controls a locomotive at the rear of the train) and locomotive-hauled trains. Cab cars are universal in U.S. commuter railroading (and transit) and common on certain Amtrak corridors, but some reporters openly questioned the appropriateness of cab cars. Even *Newsweek* published a flat-out wrong statement about rail safety.

A series of Capitol Hill hearings on rail safety covered these accidents plus several early-1996 freight train wrecks.

NARP's views were in demand. NARP Executive Director Ross Capon was interviewed by three Washington television stations on February 19, including live appearances on two

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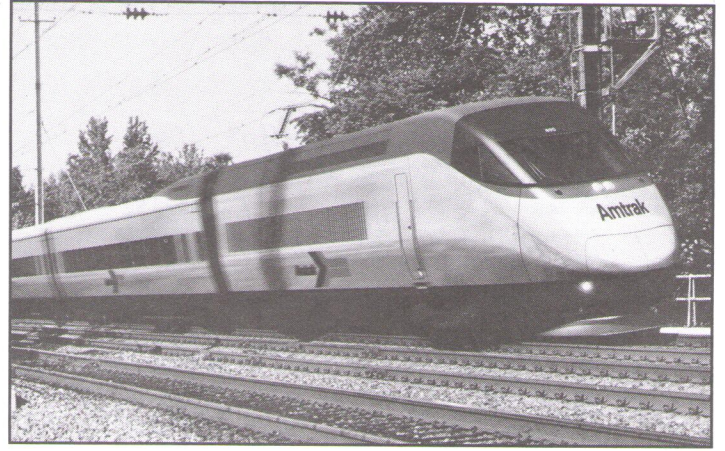
Amtrak Selects American Flyer

At a crowded news conference at Washington Union Station March 15, Vice President Al Gore announced Amtrak's selection for new trains to provide high-speed Metroliner service between Washington, New York and Boston. The winning bid was the American Flyer, to be built by a consortium made up of Bombardier Corporation and GEC Alstom.

Amtrak ordered 18 electric train-sets, which will have power cars on both ends, five 67-seat coaches and one food-service car (with 10 revenue seats; total capacity 345 per train). The trains are to run from New York to Boston in no more than three hours, use tilt technology, and run 150 mph in places. Incorporating many safety features, including crumple zones, they are described as the "safest trains in the world." Each seat will have computer and audio entertainment outlets. Trains also will have telephones and fax machines.

The American Flyer's propulsion system will be supplied by GEC Alstom (as are the French TGV's). Bombardier will build the car shells at its plant in La Pocatiere, Que. (as they have for Amtrak's Horizon and Superliner II cars), and assemble the trains at plants in Barre, VT and Plattsburgh, NY. This will create 6000 new jobs in the US (including those at an estimated 73 suppliers in 23 states).

The deal also includes 15 new electric locomotives to



—Amtrak

supplement the AEM-7 fleet when conventional service is expanded on the Boston end and to replace old E-60's that haul long-distance trains south of New York. Also, there are three maintenance facilities—a four-track one in Washington, and two-track turnaround ones in New York and Boston.

Bombardier will finance the \$611 million needed for the trains, plus some of the cost of the maintenance facilities. The total deal is worth \$754 million. Amtrak said the new trains will attract two million new rail riders a year (1.4 million diverted from the New York-Boston air corridor), resulting in a net positive annual contribution of \$150 million to Amtrak's operations. Amtrak President Tom Downs said it was better to spend "a billion-and-a-half dollars" on the entire electrification-and-train-set project than spend "\$5 billion on another Boston airport."

The Clinton budget for fiscal 1997 includes a onetime \$80-million grant for train-sets and maintenance facilities.

The first set arrives in early 1999 at Pueblo, CO for six months' testing, with a second set tested in the Northeast. Starting in October 1999, two-to-three sets arrive monthly.

The train-set order was reduced from 26. According to Amtrak, six of the electric sets were considered not to provide an adequate return on investment, and there was no funding for the two fossil-fuel sets (which were to have been demonstrated on corridors across the U.S.). But Amtrak said they could still be developed. NARP thinks these sets must be built to provide the rest of the U.S. some benefit from this Northeastern project. An FRA-Amtrak-New York State project involving turbo-trains (Dec. '95 News) continues, however.

Electric catenary construction between New Haven and Boston is to begin June 6, for completion in October 1999. ■

Clinton Budget

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to the administration and to Subcommittee Chairman Frank R. Wolf (R-VA).

Our primary concern is with the operating grant request, which is \$50 million less than Amtrak's request.

It is not unusual for an administration to "low-ball" an agency request. This shortfall, however, is especially serious:

- **Amtrak passenger revenues** have suffered because—since January 1—the temporary end of the 10% airline ticket tax has altered Amtrak's competitive balance with airlines. Federal aviation taxes expired when Congress and the White House failed to reach a budget agreement and will resume only upon enactment of a new law reinstating them.

- **Severe winter weather** helped set Amtrak operations over \$60 million behind budget this year. The Northeast's "Blizzard of 1996," in particular, caused costs to escalate and revenues to plummet—as passengers could not get to the trains. Floods cancelled Seattle-Portland service for 20 days.

- **The Administration requested** \$15 million less than Amtrak sought for fiscal 1996 freight-related excess retirement and unemployment insurance payments. The actual number turns out to be \$7 million more than Amtrak requested. But Congress went with the Administration's number and the result is a \$22 million shortfall in Amtrak's 1996 budget.

The good news about train-sets (above) has a downside: it increases the proportion of Amtrak-related resources going into the Northeast Corridor. Although the \$611 million in Bombardier financing is new money, not "stolen" from the rest of the system, the Northeast package makes it even more important to avoid more service cuts outside the Northeast.

There also is a proposed 10% increase in the Federal Railroad Administration "next generation" high speed rail program aimed at improving service in non-electrified corridors. ■

TGV'S IN FLORIDA

The Bombardier-GEC Alstom consortium also won a competitive bid for Florida high-speed train service (Dec. '95 News). The State of Florida announced the selection February 27. The trains will be called Florida Overland eXpress (or "FOX"). The group plans to use all new right-of-way to connect Miami Airport, western Broward County, West Palm Beach and Orlando Airport in 2004; and then the Disney area, Lakeland and Tampa in 2006; at a cost of \$4.8 billion.

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

More Refund Policy Changes: A policy implemented February 13, making most excursion tickets non-refundable, was rescinded quickly. Instead, Amtrak will apply a cancellation penalty equal to the charge for changing reservations (\$20; \$10 for children). NARP strongly opposed non-refundability. NARP continues to oppose the onerous pay-within-14-days (even if your trip is 11 months away) policy introduced last year.

More Cancellation Changes: As of March 6, charges for sleeping car space canceled less than 24 hours before departure—which are non-refundable under a November 29 policy—*can* be applied to future sleeper travel. Space cancellations made at least 24 hours before departure are still refundable.

Amtrak Northeast...ended checked baggage (claiming it handled only six bags per day) and red cap service at Trenton in January. Red caps are important to senior citizens, especially at a big station like Trenton where the walk from the car to the train can be long. This also means one less place on the Northeast Corridor that accepts bicycles (Aug. '95 News).

Executive Privileges Club, a benefit program for frequent Metroliner passengers, has been extended to frequent Empire Service passengers between New York and Schenectady. Benefits may be claimed after just two round-trips and include on-board discounts and Amtrak Travel Certificates. Pick up an enrollment card on a Metroliner or Empire train, or call 800/836-6656.

AAA Members: Through December 13, members of the American (and Canadian) Automobile Association get a 10% discount off lowest available Amtrak fare when showing a valid membership card at time of booking. Does not apply to peak-hour Metroliners, self-serve ticketing machines, on-board sales, special fares (e.g., senior, disabled, military, etc.).

Crescent: Will run daily during Summer Olympics—extra trips leave New York July 17-August 7; New Orleans July 19-August 9.

All four current New Orleans trips now have the same train number (19-20) and services, eliminating much passenger and Amtrak reservation agent confusion.

Florida/Silver Service: The *Star* had full dining car service restored February 16. Also, it got "Gourmet-To-Go," an all-day, take-out service for coach passengers, with food prepared in the dining car kitchen. This will be expanded to the *Meteor* April 1, at which point both trains will have the same food services.

Amtrak began a DeLand-Daytona Beach Thruway bus to/from the southbound *Star* and northbound *Meteor*

January 29.

Fort Lauderdale's Amtrak/Tri-Rail station is now served by the Rte. 22 local bus, am/pm peak, Monday-Friday (Broward County Transit, 954/357-8400).

Jacksonville's Amtrak station is served by local buses every 15 minutes, every day.

Carolinian: "Carolina Club" service began January 15, offering normal club service amenities plus at-seat video equipment. There is a \$7 supplement for travel within North Carolina; \$18-21 interstate.

April 14 Amtrak changes

NOTE—NARP already has objected to Amtrak on a number of these changes, including those which break or threaten passenger connections between trains.

Adirondack drops its Washington-New York segment. Northbound, it leaves New York at 8:30 am (connecting passengers from Washington will have to leave at 3 am). This also breaks a connection from the eastbound *Lake Shore Limited*.

Vermont's northbound Washington departure is moved from 8:05 am to 6:15 am. A 45-minute connection from *Silver Meteor* is guaranteed, but tenuous.

City of New Orleans runs six days a week (not originating either end Tuesdays), up from five.

Eastbound days of operation for *Empire Builder/Pioneer* change. *Empire Builder* departs Seattle/Portland Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday; *Pioneer* departs Seattle Monday, Wednesday, Saturday.

Mineola, TX becomes a *Texas Eagle* stop, but Newport, AR is dropped due to declining ridership (to be reconsidered if the community restores the station).

Coast Starlight runs about two hours later southbound, breaking a connection to the *Southwest Chief* at Los Angeles. While this avoids weekday Metrolink interference into Los Angeles, it reduces the amount of coastal sightseeing possible in winter. Paso Robles, CA is added as a stop.

Southwest Chief has time added to its schedule, making an eastbound connection to the *Ann Rutledge* at Kansas City tenuous.

The fourth Bay Area-Sacramento Capitol Corridor train begins.

Food and beverage service ends on NortheastDirect trains whose entire runs are New York-Washington (as opposed to Boston-Washington, or New York-Richmond).

California Transit: BART opened its Daly City-Colma extension February 23.

Metrolink extended its Irvine-Riverside commuter rail line 10 miles to San Bernardino March 4.

FEWER SLUMBERCOACHES

With slumbercoaches set to disappear (except on the New York-Miami *Silver Star*), the U.S. is losing its last true economy sleepers. NARP has urged Amtrak to consider rebuilding these cars, due to their high capacity. Indeed, they compare even better with the Viewliners when *effective* capacity is considered. Viewliners lack one-bed rooms, so every sale to a single traveler means an empty bed; 100% occupancy is virtually impossible on Viewliners, but quite likely on slumbercoaches, which have 16 single rooms. The 30-bed Viewliners are likely to have 26-27 passengers; slumbercoaches at 100% would have 36 or 40, depending on whether two double rooms are converted into public washrooms.

Rail Safety

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local news shows of the Fox and NBC affiliates. He testified February 27 before the Maryland legislature's Joint Committee on Federal Services, and March 12 to the Railroads Subcommittee of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. Rep. Spencer Bachus (R-AL) entered Capon's letter on cab car and commuter rail safety into the record of the same committee's March 5-6 hearing.

NARP raised the following concerns:

- There are National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) recommendations which Amtrak has implemented but some commuter railroads have not, including adequate interior and exterior labeling of emergency-exit windows.
- The Federal Railroad Administration should review whether railroad dispatcher work loads are appropriate and how much information dispatchers *must* give engineers.
- If this nation invested in its railroads as enthusiastically as in highways, the Silver Spring and Secaucus accidents would not have occurred—advanced train control would have been installed on mainlines long ago. We agree with NTSB that there should be a firm timetable for installation of such a control system in the near future. We think this requirement should not be imposed only on passenger railroads.
- Train crew members—especially engineers—working split shifts should be able to spend their rest period in a decent environment that permits rest, not curled up in an out-of-use commuter car (as the New Jersey crew reportedly was).
- There is no reason to encourage passengers to occupy lead cars of lightly-used commuter trains (as on MARC train 286)—whether the train is being pushed or pulled. (It appears that crew initiative will be required to change this.)
- Cab cars have been extraordinarily safe for those riding them. The economic benefits of cab cars also have saved lives by allowing more passenger trains and more reasonable fares than would have been possible without cab cars.
- U.S. railroad passenger cars are the world's strongest, with end-loading "buffing" strength of at least 800,000 pounds.
- Based on passenger fatalities per passenger mile, U.S. commuter rail was 19.3 times safer than the automobile during the ten years ending in 1993. ■

CAN'T KEEP PAVING

"Jack Hodge, chief engineer for the Virginia Department of Transportation, [retired February 29] after 38 years with VDOT...The first important construction project Hodge served on was as an inspector for the Springfield Interchange [I-95 at Capital Beltway] in 1959. At \$1 million, it was the largest single construction contract ever undertaken in the state.

"Today, \$1 million would barely cover a modest-sized piece of right of way in Northern Virginia. The estimated cost of redoing the interchange, now a notorious traffic area: \$350 million..."

"Ironically, amid all the building, Hodge said he's come to see the limitations of America's single passenger automobile: 'I've come to realize we can't continue to add lanes of pavement. We've got to find ways to get more people into fewer vehicles, and out of the beloved automobile.'"

—Charles Slack, "Wings and Wheels" column, Richmond [VA] Times-Dispatch, February 26, 1996

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS IN PORTLAND, OR

A large display of railroad equipment is scheduled for May 10-12, for the centennial of the landmark Union Station in Portland, OR. Also, some steam excursions are planned between Portland and Vancouver, BC, May 4-14 (call Northwest Rail Museum, 503/244-4449 for excursion information).

ATTENTION INTERNET USERS!

NARP now has a web site (<http://www.worldweb.net/~narp>), and will add links and improvements in coming months. If you have a personal web site, please help increase NARP's visibility on the internet by creating a link to the NARP site.

Send NARP a message (at narp@worldweb.net) with your e-mail address. We will add you to a growing list of members who receive occasional requests for information and other material from the NARP office electronically.



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