

**SENATE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE HEARING ON INTER-CITY  
PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE**

**Testimony Prepared for Assistant Commissioner for Finance &  
Integrated Modal Services Janet Ho**

**Monday, January 29**

**Van Buren Hearing Room A**

**10 a.m.**

Good morning, Senator Kennedy and members of the Transportation Committee.

I am Janet Ho, the Assistant Commissioner for Finance & Integrated Modal Services at the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT).

On behalf of our Commissioner, Marie Therese Dominguez, I thank you for providing this opportunity to address the committee and discuss this important topic. It is an honor to appear before you today.

Let me begin by stating unequivocally that the Department of Transportation under the leadership of Governor Hochul understands the importance of reliable and efficient passenger rail service to New York State and remains committed to supporting and improving the passenger experience all across the state.

As part of this commitment, New York State has made substantial investments to enhance reliability, expand service and ensure a more enjoyable and convenient experience for the passenger.

And these investments are paying off.

During the 2023 federal fiscal year, we set all-time records on Amtrak's state-supported service routes, with ridership in excess of 1.8 million passengers and revenue in excess of \$102 million. Amtrak finished their fiscal year with an on-time performance (OTP) of 84.7% in the New York to Albany corridor and an overall combined OTP of 78.1% for all NYS supported services.

***Support for Passenger Rail***

To support passenger rail service in New York, the State provides approximately \$44 million a year to subsidize Amtrak's Service. This includes the popular Empire Service, which provides 7 daily round trips between New York City and Albany; the Maple Leaf Service, which includes two daily round trips between New York City and Niagara Falls, and one daily round trip between New York City and Toronto. It also includes the Adirondack service providing a daily round trip between New York City and Montreal, and the Ethan Allen Express service providing a daily round trip between New York City and Burlington, VT.

We are also actively exploring new opportunities to expand passenger rail service. Working with our partners in Massachusetts and at Amtrak, we launched the Berkshire

Flyer providing seasonal service to Pittsfield, MA. And working with our partners in Vermont, we recently extended Ethan Allen Express service to Burlington, VT.

In addition to financial support, we have made substantial investments to improve reliability and create a more convenient experience for rail passengers.

These investments include the new stations in Schenectady, Rochester, Niagara Falls, and downtown Buffalo at Exchange Street. And, of course, there's the Moynihan Station Train Hall, which provides riders with a majestic gateway as they travel to and from New York City.

We have also invested in track and signal projects, including a new second track along 17 miles between Albany and Schenectady, a new 4<sup>th</sup> track at Rensselaer Station, grade crossing improvements and positive train control along the Hudson Line. This greatly improved performance by removing bottlenecks that limit capacity and increasing reliability.

We are partnering with Amtrak on the development of their new Aero Trainsets, which will bring an enhanced passenger experience and reduced train emissions to all our routes in upcoming years.

Additionally, New York State and Amtrak have jointly funded more than \$100 million in projects that have replaced rails and ties, stabilized slopes; and rehabilitated railroad bridges and culverts. These and other strategic investments help to increase speeds, improve reliability, and enhance safety.

### ***Planning for the Future***

We know that more needs to be done to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

That is why we initiated the Empire Corridor High Speed Rail Program to help achieve our vision of a passenger rail system with:

- Increased speeds
- Reduced travel times
- Better on-time performance and efficiency
- Reduced interference from freight trains
- Minimized impacts to the environment and local communities
- Better service to all the communities and constituents along the Empire Rail Corridor

We believe these goals will help us provide better travel options for New Yorkers, increase ridership, and help create a more balanced, multi-modal transportation system.

In 2023, this program achieved a major milestone with the publication of the final Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement or EIS and the Record of Decision by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).

The completion of this federally mandated study allows the Department of Transportation to begin the process of identifying and obtaining federal funds for

multiple projects that will help us fulfill the program goals along the entire 463-mile-long corridor between Niagara Falls and New York City.

The Tier 1 EIS evaluated a range of alternatives to build infrastructure improvements and enhance passenger rail service.

After extensive analysis and public outreach, the study settled on a preferred alternative that supports a maximum speed of up to 110 mph between the Capital District and New York City and 90 mph between Hoffmans (near Amsterdam) and Niagara Falls; it would add train service – four new round trips between Albany and Niagara Falls, and four new round trips between Albany and New York City.

While we realize that a maximum speed of 110 miles per hour likely may not meet the popularly held definition of high-speed rail, it still represents an extraordinarily challenging undertaking given the age and condition of the State's existing rail infrastructure and property constraints all along the corridor. The Empire Corridor is one of the most complex rail corridors in the nation with track segments controlled by multiple owners, including CSX, Amtrak, and the Metro North Railroad.

Achieving higher speed alternatives would essentially require the creation of an entirely new corridor that would have to be carved through what are now existing neighborhoods. A new sealed, two-track, electrified railway would need to be dedicated exclusively to high-speed passenger train service. This would involve the acquisition of substantial right-of-way from private property owners; and have significant environmental and community impacts.

Construction of this new corridor would be a massive effort that would include new roadbed, tracks, viaducts, bridges, embankments, access roads, railroad systems, maintenance, and other support facilities. The footprint of this new corridor would require the acquisition of approximately 3,000 acres of privately owned land, impacting adjacent wetlands, parks, and farmland.

And all this would come with a heavy financial burden. According to the EIS' analysis, creating a system capable of just 125 miles per hour maximum speed would cost more than \$15 billion (in 2017 dollars).

As it stands, the implementation of the Tier 1 EIS' preferred alternative will include the construction of more than 340 miles of new third and fourth track between Albany and Buffalo and 28 miles of new double track between Buffalo and Niagara Falls.

Improvements between Albany and New York would include upgrading the entire signal system, straightening track curvature to allow for higher speeds, and constructing new interlockings and siding tracks. Station platforms will need to be upgraded and modernized at Rhinecliff, Hudson, Amsterdam, Utica, and Buffalo Depew stations.

These improvements would not only allow for increased speeds, but would also reduce track conflicts with freight trains, thereby improving overall efficiency and reducing travel times.

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