



Governor Announces Outside Experts High Speed Rail Review

In a December 26th press release, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced he would convene outside experts to reexamine and rethink strategies to bring high speed to New York.

“High speed rail is transforming economies around the world”, he said. “We’ve been told that bring this technology to our state is too expensive, too difficult and would take too long – that’s not an acceptable attitude for New York.”

High speed rail is defined as trains that travel at a maximum authorize speed (MAS) of 125 miles per hour or more. Current NYS train lines average 51 miles per hour.

A trigger for the idea to review past high-speed rail plans was the Governor’s experience with the planned repair of the NYS subway “L train” tunnel. Dissatisfied with the cost of the planned repairs and the long time to complete repairs, Cuomo assembled a team of experts to question every assumption and brought new creativity to a seemingly unsolvable problem.

“We not only found a way to repair the tunnel without shutting down service, we are doing it ahead of schedule,” the Governor noted. “This kind of outside-the-box thinking will help us determine if we could deliver high speed rail for New York.”

The Governor’s press office said that over the last two decades, recommendations to implement high speed rail across the have consistently estimated that projects would take decades and be unaffordable. “This team of experts will review these past studies, and strategies that countries all over the world have used to build thousands of miles of high speed rail, to ask every question and find the best way to build high speed rail in New York,” he said.

Governor Cuomo’s press release was part of a series of releases which suggested the issues he would focus on in his January 8th “State of the State Message” to the Legislature. Specifics were not covered, including who would be appointed to the expert panel, its cost or the timeline of the review. Since this article is being written at the end of December, it is expected that more details will emerge in the early January State of the State Message or the State Budget released later that month.

Any panel ideas may serve as a path to craft a State response to the release of the long-delayed Federal “notice of decision” on the Empire Corridor Draft Environmental Impact Study. That draft study offered five alternatives for rail improvements ranging from “do nothing” through

(Cont’d on page 5)

Better Intercity Rail Program Management

If New York State going forward is to have a robust program for inter-city rail, it needs robust “Passenger Rail Division” within NYSDOT.

The grossly-delayed Empire Corridor HSR Environmental Impact Study, and lack of an updated state rail plan as required by federal law, are symptoms of the problem at NYSDOT.

This is not to ignore the significant investment in the Empire Corridor over the past decade the state has made – including the Albany-Schenectady second track; track and platform work at the Rensselaer station; signalling and grade crossing work on the Hudson Line; and the construction of several new stations in Upstate New York – with the receipt and implementation of large ARRA/TIGER grants. Yet today no major plans exist beyond these completed actions.

Other states that have impressive programs for their state supported PRIIA Section 209 Amtrak corridors have large and capable organizations overseeing passenger rail. For example, Washington State has a large rail division within its DOT, while Maine created an independent rail authority to manage the *Downeaster*.

(Cont’d on page 5)

Lake Shore Limited – What Happened to Service?

I departed Chicago the evening of Christmas Day and (as the picture shows) this was my breakfast as it was placed on my table in the new Amtrak *Viewliner* Dining Car on Train 48 (the eastbound *Lake Shore Limited*) as we departed Erie, PA. I had ordered the one and only hot item on the menu. This is a disgrace; service far worse than anything one could encounter at a fast food restaurant!



I was later informed that this is actually better service than other people have had on the *Lake Shore*, as often one must walk over to the end of the seating area where the kitchen entrance is, and pick up your “breakfast”, whereas mine was placed on the table by the “Sleeper Lounge” attendant. ESPA has repeatedly protested this “Flexible Dining,” as Amtrak calls it, but the leadership at Amtrak claims this is the best they can do with the need to reduce food costs and to operate the service financially prudent.

(Cont’d on page 4)

Amtrak Hearing in Congress

On November 13, 2019, the Transportation and Infrastructure subcommittee had a hearing titled, “Amtrak: Now and into the Future”.

The chairman of the subcommittee mentioned that on the *Coast Starlight* that “people sleeping in the Sightseer Lounge car with backpacks and sleeping bags” made the lounge car unusable for most passengers, including the high revenue sleeper car passengers who no longer have their own lounge car, since the *Pacific Parlor Car* was removed over a year ago. Richard Anderson, the CEO of Amtrak, spoke and constantly stated the need to develop the “urban corridors” and “short haul between cities” and he specifically mentioned the Northeast Corridor, the Milwaukee to Chicago corridor, and the San Diego to LA corridor. He also stressed the importance of safely including PTC and SMS, which is an approach to safe operations used by Delta Airlines. Mr. Anderson also stated that Amtrak was investing \$800 million in new locomotives for long distance trains and that Amtrak would be investing money to replace all bedding, pillows, and mattresses in all sleeper cars and an overhaul of all coaches on the long-distance trains. He also stated that Amtrak would begin accepting delivery of the new Acela II trainsets very soon, and that likely within 6 months Amtrak would order about \$2 billion of new coaches to replace *Amfleet I* and *Amfleet II* coaches from the 1970s and 1980s.

Several speakers at the hearing were leaders of various unions of Amtrak employees and they stated the need of having the long-distance Amtrak network, the need to connect the short-distance corridors with long-distance trains, and the need to cement Amtrak as a true national rail passenger system. Mr. Jack Dinesdale, national VP of the Communications Workers Union, went a step further and accused Amtrak of outright lying, “systematic campaign of union busting”, and “self-sabotaging tactics to jettison passengers off of long-distance trains.” Another union speaker stated that, “cutbacks in food and beverage employees hurts ridership, hurts the customer experience, and drives down ridership.”

Mr. Jim Mathews, president of the Rail Passengers Association, stated the need for Amtrak trains to operate on time with better freight railroad dispatching and that Amtrak should use “Avoidable Cost Accounting Methods” for decision-making, not the “Fully Allocated” accounting methods that Amtrak uses today. He also showed a “Survival Pack” that many Amtrak sleeper car passengers often have, which includes “a clear plastic bag with duct tape, Velcro, pieces of wood and plastic (to stop rattling), hand sanitizer, and a power strip”

Stacy Mortensen, Executive Director for the San Joaquin Joint Powers Authority, which manages one of California's three Amtrak rail passenger corridors, stated, “Amtrak protects its proprietary data, solely develops rail service plans and staffing allocation without input”, and “costs are a proportional share of Amtrak's overall costs, with a lack of transparency” and “Amtrak has no incentive nor interest in partnerships” She continued, “costs increase without any explanation, resulting in defensiveness, resistance, and futility.” And she concluded by stating, “local Amtrak

employees are held hostage to the broken national Amtrak structure.”

The committee was certainly provided with a lot of information to consider for the reauthorization of Amtrak, for FFY 2021, which starts on October 1, 2020. *Gary Prophet*

New Passenger Rail Funds Become Law

Enactment of a federal fiscal year 2020 (FFY20) budget just before Christmas added money to the Restoration and Enhancement grant program for passenger rail service. By adding \$1.9 billion, the amount available for passenger improvements rose to just over \$26 billion, which may be used to initiate, restore or enhance inter-city passenger rail.

The federal monies can be utilized for both operating assistance and capital costs, according to the Federal Railroad Administration. The “Funding Notice” says that projects eligible for funding include: “additional frequency of current service; offering new on-board services; establishing new service; extension of current service; and restoration of previously operated service.”

Examples of some specific projects mentioned in the “Funding Notice” were passenger rail staffing, fuel, electricity, station expenses, lease payments on rolling stock, routine planned maintenance, host railroad access costs, train yard operation and administrative costs.

Eligible recipients include a state, a political subdivision of a state, or a public agency or publicly chartered authority of a state. Amtrak is eligible to apply on its own.

Federal officials said: “These grants help ensure communities continue to have access to the inter-city passenger rail network that connects our country”. Applications must be submitted by February 5, 2020.

This federal funding availability could support a number of New York State inter-city passenger projects. Its broad allowance for basic operating costs (rather than just capital expenditures) might help restore Hudson Valley food service; add baggage cars to the *Maple Leaf* and *Adirondack*; restore a Schenectady early morning – late return train to/from New York City, or extend existing service to Saratoga Springs for an early departure to/late arrival from New York. A number of other lower cost improvements to inter-city passenger service in the Empire State may be appropriate candidates for these federal funds. *Tony Rudmann*

GO GREEN

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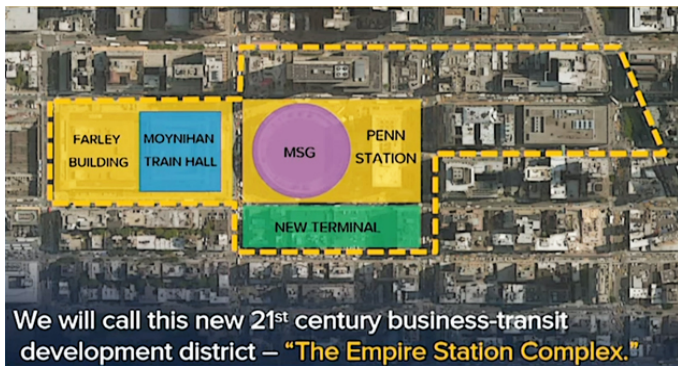
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Cuomo: A Bigger and Better Penn Station

Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that the 30th Proposal of his 2020 State of the State address is “Creating a 21st Century Empire Station Complex in Manhattan”. While this proposal included previously announced improvements to Amtrak’s Pennsylvania Station (which is shared with the LIRR and NJT), it also included “Penn Station South”.

Penn Station South has been part of the Gateway Program (whose centerpiece is two new tunnels under the Hudson River) to expand station capacity by acquiring the block immediately south of the existing station to build new tracks and platforms. The cost of acquiring the real estate alone has been estimated at well over a billion dollars, but the Governor’s Office press release stated that commercial development of air rights would fund the project’s cost.



Penn Station South

According to the Governor’s Office press release, with Penn Station South the overall capacity of Penn Station would be expanded 40% by the construction of 8 new tracks serving 4 new platforms, seamlessly connected to expanded existing station concourses. However, according to previous Penn South plans, these tracks would be stub-end tracks that could only serve trains to and from the west: NJT commuter and Amtrak inter-city trains, albeit no run-through to Sunnyside Yard or Grand Central Terminal.

Also included in the “Empire Station Complex Plan” is the immediate improvements underway to open the new Moynihan Train Hall and expand the LIRR corridor on the Lower Level. The State will also explore acquiring the Madison Square Garden Theater – located below the main MSG area – to create a new block-long grand entrance on 8th Avenue. Other improvements include: better aesthetics and lighting; higher-end retail; more waiting areas; more pedestrian circulation space; new street entrances; and better, consistent wayfinding signage.

The plan will be overseen by Empire State Development, which will establish a General Project Plan in collaboration with the MTA and Amtrak. MTA will be responsible for the transportation planning components of the project and the plan to transform Penn Station. New York State, Amtrak and other stakeholders will partner with a consultant design team – led by FXCollaborative – to develop and facilitate the plan to transformation.

Penn Station is the busiest transit facility in the Western Hemisphere, serving more passengers than John F. Kennedy, LaGuardia, and Newark Airports combined. Every day, more than 650,000 passengers navigate the station’s underground labyrinth of corridors, concourses, stairs, and elevators,

unhelpfully divided into separate, poorly integrated areas for Amtrak (Upper Level), and NJT and LIRR (Lower Level).

Once an architectural marvel, after the 1960s demolition of the original 1910 neoclassical Pennsylvania Station, the station has become an embarrassment. If the governor is successful with his grand remodelling and expansion plans, then Manhattan will once again have a world class rail station at Penn Station. A better station will encourage more transit and rail usage, a necessity for a greener world. *Ben Turon*

Need for Baggage Cars on the Maple Leaf

Travel by train across the Keystone State got more convenient this autumn with the addition of a baggage car to the state supported *Pennsylvanian*; the once daily New York-Philadelphia-Harrisburg-Pittsburgh corridor service. This will enable passengers to check baggage or bicycles for the *Pennsylvanian* at New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Lancaster, Harrisburg, Altoona, Johnstown, and Pittsburgh (where baggage and bike transfer is available to the Washington-Chicago *Capitol Limited*).

This move is the result of cooperation between Amtrak and the PennDOT to improve both the corridor service and the connecting long-distance train. According to reliable sources, Amtrak is preliminarily charging its state partner about \$300K a year, with the rest of the additional cost being allocated to Amtrak’s long-distance service line.

This led us at ESPA to wonder why the same could not be done for our own Empire Corridor? Currently baggage service is offered via the NYC-Boston-Chicago *Lake Shore Limited* to several Upstate cities. Yet expansion of this amenity to an additional train frequency would be beneficial to passengers and the greater economy.

Amtrak employees in informal conversations with ESPA have agreed that a baggage car is highly desirable on the NYC-Niagara Falls-Toronto *Maple Leaf*, Trains 63 and 64. The paramount reasons are safety and wheelchair access as passengers are constantly placing baggage in the area reserved for wheelchair passengers, and at busy times baggage piles up in the center aisles, car end vestibules, and near the bathrooms.

The schedule of Trains 63 and 64 is such that they are the most popular trains with families travelling between New York City and Central and Western NY. Utilization of Amtrak Express Shipping for parcel freight would become more attractive.

The addition of a baggage car to the *Maple Leaf* would also promote tourism to Upstate NY. Checked bicycles would be a great convenience as the *Maple Leaf* is a daytime train across Upstate NY. The much promoted and currently being developed Erie Canalway Trail parallels the Empire Corridor from Niagara Falls to Albany. Cyclists could even take the train to one end of the Canalway Trail, and then pedal their way back home.

The Harbor Center in downtown Buffalo features plenty of hockey events, but people with hockey equipment cannot take the train because there is no place for their equipment. It would be a big plus if the new Exchange Street Station had checked baggage for the *Maple Leaf*, as well as being fully staffed on weekends for Trains 63 and 64. Other Upstate destinations would similarly benefit from sporting equipment

and other baggage being transportable on a corridor train.

As to the question of the international border: according to some at Amtrak, the baggage car would have to be empty as it crosses the border. With just an average of only 18 passengers crossing the border at Niagara Falls on each train this is not really a huge problem.

And what about the NYC-Montreal *Adirondack*? Unfortunately, there are two serious issues: the border crossing at Rouses Point and the lack of staffed stations north of Saratoga Springs. While these two issues could be resolved in time, it doesn't seem practical near-term. Perhaps more could be done to create space for bikes, sporting equipment, and other luggage within an expanded train consist made up of the planned Amfleet replacement single-level corridor coaches and café cars.

Baggage cars for the *Maple Leaf* is a straightforward and pragmatic service improvement that could be executed in short order. The fact that the *Pennsylvanian* now has one means that there is no reason that New York State cannot have one on selected trains, as well. And those new Viewliner baggage cars were built by CAF USA in Elmira, so it would be utilizing a home state industrial product.

In the coming months ESPA will look to do more to bring this idea of baggage cars for the *Maple Leaf* to the attention of various stakeholders including bicycle organizations, local mayors, I Love NY, and NYSDOT. You can do your part by writing or calling your local state representatives and letting them know this is an important transportation enhancement for the state.

Ben Turon

Virginia Announces \$3.7 Billion Rail Infrastructure Upgrade

Virginia rail passengers got an early Christmas present with the announcement of a deal among the Commonwealth, CSX and Amtrak, to spend \$3.7 billion to upgrade rail infrastructure over the next decade. When completed, Amtrak service in Virginia will double and the Virginia Railway Express (VRE) commuter service will increase by 75 percent.

Under the plan, the state will own a new two-track bridge constructed across the Potomac River for exclusive use by passenger trains between Washington, DC and Alexandria, Virginia. The existing two track "Long Bridge" has been a bottleneck for rail traffic south of Washington and currently handles 24 Amtrak trains, 34 VRE trains and 18 CSX freight trains daily.

Under major elements of the plan, the state will acquire 225 miles of track from CSX and 350 miles of rail right-of-way and make 37 miles of track improvements. Planning ahead, the Commonwealth will acquire the abandoned "S-Line" from Petersburg, Virginia, to North Carolina for future high-speed service and preserve an existing freight corridor between Doswell and Clifton Forge for future east-west passenger service.

Amtrak service will double in Virginia, providing nearly hourly service between Washington and state capital of Richmond, and trains added from there to Newport News, and an improved (thrice daily) train service to Norfolk. In addition, all Amtrak East Coast service south of Washington will enjoy fewer delays with the new bridge and added track

capacity.

The VRE 75 percent train service boost will allow 15-minute operating headways during peak periods and inauguration of weekend service. Also, the planned improvements may lead to a resumption of discussions to have some VRE trains go into Maryland and some of MARC commuter service go into Virginia.

Virginia Governor Ralph Northam called the agreement "a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make our rail system work better for everyone, both in Virginia and on the entire East Coast."

VRE Operation Board Chair Katie Crisol said the deal "will enable us to grow service ... thereby improving the quality of life and increasing economic opportunities for tens of thousands more Virginians."

Amtrak has approved a memorandum of understanding with Virginia supporting its role in the project. According to an Amtrak senior executive vice president, "This program is a model for the nation of how to grow passenger and freight service together in order to relieve congestion, protect our environment and enhance mobility." *Tony Rudmann*

Lake Shore (Cont'd from page 1)

Amtrak claims ridership is up on the *Lake Shore Limited* from last year, but they have compared the ridership to 2018 when the *Lake Shore* only operated Boston to Chicago, with no New York section, for the entire summer. For FY 2019, *Lake Shore Limited* ridership was 357,700 passengers, compared to FY2017 ridership of 388,700 passengers, a loss of 31,000 passengers which is an 8% reduction in ridership. In addition, Amtrak used to limit the number of passengers travelling on Train 49 between New York and Albany, but now does not, so often 100-150 passengers travel on Train 49 to Albany from New York and are counted as *Lake Shore Limited* passengers, whereas in the past most of these passengers took one of the many Empire Corridor afternoon trains. This alone boasts the ridership of the *Lake Shore* (possibly by 30,000 per year), but it is just carrying passengers for 142 miles and acting as an *Empire Service* train. Even worse, the pricing of the *Lake Shore Limited* used to discourage Empire Corridor passengers from taking Train 48 from Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse to New York. Now, sometimes the fares on Train 48 are far less (as much as half) of *Empire Service* trains on the same day. On my December trip from Chicago to Croton-Harmon, 297 passengers boarded Train 48 between Buffalo and Utica, nearly all travelling to New York. My specific train was sold out nearly 3 weeks in advance, so longer distance passengers (from west of Buffalo) were not able to ride on Train 48 because no seats were available for those who wished to travel without 3 weeks advance purchase. Amtrak would seem to be purposely attracting more Empire Corridor passengers to the *Lake Shore* so that large ridership losses from longer distance passengers as a result of the incredible poor food service is hidden from the people viewing its ridership reports.

The current operation of the *Lake Shore* is that only sleeper car passengers have access to the Sleeper Lounge (built as a new *Viewliner* Diner) and coach passengers, even those travelling New York to/from Chicago, have access only to the café car. In addition, the café car is operated only on the

Boston section, so coach passengers boarding in New York on Train 49 have no option to purchase food or drink until after Schenectady, which is after 7:30pm in the evening if it runs on time. For Train 48, the café closes soon after Utica, and then no food option for coach passengers for the five-hour plus trip from its closure through its arrival at New York.

Since New Year's weekend, Train 49 has been departing New York with just 2 coaches, 2 sleepers, a Sleeper Lounge, and a baggage car. It is important to note that many days in advance Train 49 was sold out for coach travel on Friday, Jan 10, departing New York, with passengers from New York to Albany reserving at least half of the seats, along with the few number of coach seats available with the drastically reduced number of coaches for the off-peak season. Amtrak is operating sold out trains in the off-peak season with just 2 coaches! Since Amtrak seems to be purposely harming the *Lake Shore Limited*, ESPA is now reviewing the operation of the *Lake Shore Limited* with members of Congress and the US Senate, so that rail passenger service can be preserved and also improved in the future, even with an operator (Amtrak) who does not seem interested in any rail passengers who wish to travel over 300 miles on a train.

Gary Prophet

Governor Announces (Cont'd from page 1)

125 mph Maximum Authorized Speed. Improvements costs were estimated from a low 900 million for basic changes to \$16 billion to build full 125 mph high speed service. The federal ruling is due May 2020.

Tony Rudmann

Better Intercity Rail (Cont'd from page 1)

Virginia has a separate rail and public transit agency supported by a dedicated rail fund financed by a dedicated a sales tax. The state has been making steady progress over the past decade improving and expanding its Amtrak service. In December 2019 Virginia signed a deal with CSX to invest \$3.7 billion in the DC-Richmond-North Carolina rail corridor.

When the rail division within NYSDOT was much larger in the 1970-80s the state had an impressive inter-city rail program. Starting with several bond acts over a \$100 million was invested in tracks, signals, and stations, while travel time was cut and train frequency increased between New York City and Albany.

The result was a 75% increase by 1983 in ridership over 1974 with trains carrying 1.25 million passengers. This was growth significantly higher than the national average by other Amtrak services.. However, budget cutting and other priorities shrank the rail division in the late 1980s, leading to a loss of institutional knowledge and capability. . The result was the failure of the Pataki-era Turboliner rebuilding program.

According to a 2003 report by the state controller, mismanagement by NYSDOT was a primary cause. The report cited the lack of necessary experience of the agency to run a complex rail project. It would not be until the Andrew Cuomo administration a decade later that the resulting lawsuit with Amtrak would be settled, and the half-rebuilt 1970s-era Turboliner trains scrapped.

An even bigger mismanagement of a state high speed rail

program has occurred in California. In 2008, their voters approved a \$10 billion ballot issue to jump start the estimated \$33 billion HSR project that had been in planning for over a decade by a dedicated authority, the CHSRA.

However, rather than beefing up the authority's staff with in-house planners, engineers, and other experts, the decision was made to save money – beyond a tiny staff of a dozen individuals – by outsourcing the entire effort to private consultants, led by the international engineering firm WSP.

The result a decade later was a fiasco as the project fell years behind schedule and many tens of billion over budget. Governor Gavin Newsom is currently working to get the project back on track by reducing dependency on consultants and contractors, bringing the necessary talent into state employment within the CHSRA.

For public works megaprojects from the Panama Canal to the Hoover Dam to the Interstate Highway System, private engineering and construction firms have played a big role. Yet without proper oversight and independent knowledge by the public agency responsible for the project, unquestioned bad decisions can lead to unquestionably bad outcomes.

Overall, America has become very bad at infrastructure projects. Recent reporting by the *New York Times* on two MTA projects – the 2nd Ave Subway and LIRR East Side Access – showed how these projects cost billions more than comparable projects in Europe and East Asia.

Compared to subway construction in Paris, New York City showed a shocking lack of following international best practices in the management and construction of rail infrastructure.

Moving forward, the state needs to increase the staffing and budgeting for the currently small state rail division at NYSDOT. And not just to plan the state's future inter-city rail system, but to manage the trains – the *Empire Service*, *Maple Leaf*, *Adirondack*, and with Vermont the *Ethan Allen Express* – which the state pays Amtrak \$45 million annually under contract to run, as required under the 2008 Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (PRIIA).

Currently the state's management seems to be on “autopilot” as overall service on the Empire Corridor has not change in terms of speed, frequency, or capacity since the early 1990s.

Many other states have complained about Amtrak's unresponsive management and opaque financial accounting of state-supported services.

If New York is to have a world class inter-city rail passenger system throughout the state, it needs to attract and hire a knowledgeable staff of professional rail operators, managers, engineers, and other transportation and financial experts at the New York State Department of Transportation.

Ben Turon

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40th Annual Meeting
of the
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Meetings:

Sat, March 7, 2020: ESPA Annual Meeting at Proctor's Hall in Schenectady from 11am-4pm (meeting confirmed)

Sat, April 18, 2020 at Katie O'Brynes Restaurant in Schenectady from Noon to 4:00pm

Sat, May 30, 2020 at Katie O'Brynes Restaurant in Schenectady from Noon to 4:00pm

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