



## ESPA's Goals for the Empire Corridor

In 2008, the US Congress passed the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (PRIIA) which mandated through PRIIA Section 209 that the states take on the costs of Amtrak routes – outside the Northeast Corridor – less than 750 miles long. Amtrak's overnight long distance trains, like the NYC-Boston-Chicago *Lake Shore Limited*, would remain fully funded by the national passenger railroad.

PRIIA Section 209 went into effect on October 16, 2013 – and since then New York State has annually paid to Amtrak about \$45 million to cover the operating and capital costs of its Empire Corridor, including the *Empire Service*, *Maple Leaf*, *Adirondack*, and (with Vermont) the *Ethan Allen Express*.

As the result of PRIIA Section 209, it is primarily New York State (through NYSDOT) and not Amtrak that is responsible for the quality and level of intercity passenger rail service within our state. This is a fact not fully realized by the general public, local press, or state politicians.

ESPA hopes to work to change awareness of this situation through education outreach. Along with such education on Section 209, ESPA has drawn up a list of actions we feel that the state should undertake with Amtrak to maintain, improve, and expand passenger rail service along the Empire Corridor.

### Food Service

The commissary in Rensselaer was shuttered by Amtrak as a cost cutting measure in 2005. As a result of Congressional

(Cont'd on page 4)



Bruce Becker

## New Exchange Street Station Rises Up

The steel for the new Buffalo Exchange Street station is going up! The soaring barrel ceiling will certainly provide a suitably impressive welcome for passengers arriving into

downtown Buffalo. Plan completion and opening is in autumn of 2020. A temporary station on site serves current passengers during construction.

## DEC Releases Adirondack Travel Corridor Plan Amendment

The New York State departments of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and Transportation (DOT) in mid-November released the draft Remsen-Lake Placid Travel Corridor Unit Management Plan Amendment and a supplemental environmental impact statement.

The DEC under the Cuomo Administration has for years battled with railroad supporters over converting the Travel Corridor into a recreation trail. The Adirondack Railway Preservation Society – parent of the Adirondack Scenic Railroad (ASR) – won a legal victory in 2017 against the state removing the tracks.

Having addressed the legal issues raised by the lawsuit, the DEC is now moving forward again. Their new plan is literally a Solomonic compromise of splitting the rail line into two halves! The estimated \$44.8 million plan calls for converting a portion of the current Travel Corridor into a recreational trail with removal of the ties and tracks, while rehabilitating the rest for rail transport.

The 34-mile end section of the rail corridor between Tupper Lake, Saranac Lake and Lake Placid would be converted into a recreational trail for use by cyclists, walkers, skiers, and snowmobiles.

In return, 85 miles of track from Remsen (north of Utica where the state-owned rail corridor diverges from the MA&N Railway) to Tupper Lake, via the hamlets of Thendara (Old Forge), Big Moose and Beaver River, would be rehabilitated, including the complete rehabilitation of the 36-mile out-of-service section north of Big Moose for new use by the tourist railroad.

This rail improvement program includes nearly \$13 million for a new rail station, wye, and locomotive maintenance facility in Tupper Lake, which would become the new northern terminus for the railroad.

The state also is helping to fund a new maintenance facility near Utica Union Station, the ASR's southern terminus, awarding in 2014 a \$791,000 grant to railroad to help construct a 4,800 square-foot building with two tracks, an inspection pit, and a repair room.

Currently, the railroad repairs its rolling stock outdoors beneath highway overpasses adjacent to the Union Station grounds.

Tupper Lake, a village that is home to only about 3,600 year-round residents, has several attractions

(Cont'd on pg. 3)

## Capitol Gondola moves to Environmental Review

Capitol Gondola, the \$25 million project to build an aerial cable transport lift between the Albany-Rensselaer Rail Station and the Empire State Plaza/Times Union Center, is moving forward with a formal environmental review, including archaeological studies.

According to the *Albany Times Union*, the Albany-based company has raised \$1.7 million and spent \$1.5 million since the project was first proposed in 2016. The company promotes gondolas as a convenient and reliable way to get people to and from the Rensselaer train station – Amtrak's ninth busiest – and Downtown Albany.

It is estimated that the gondola line would transport about 900,000 passengers a year. The system would be anchored by two 5,000-square-foot stations at each end. There would be 11 support towers, ranging in height from 40 feet to 133 feet, along the roughly mile-long route. The company will have to negotiate acquiring air rights and easements for the gondolas and the towers involving 20 properties.

The *Times Union* reports that the Rensselaer Planning Commission has been told by Capital Gondola that they has secured up to 80 percent of the funding for the project from private sources and that grants can cover the remaining construction costs. It was estimated that the Capitol Gondola would start service in 2020, but seems be unrealistic with the environmental review process now just starting.

*Ben Turon*

## Ethan Allen Express to Burlington by 2021

Dan Delabruere of the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTTrans) – chief of Vermont's rail and aviation division – stated this fall that passenger train service to Burlington, with stops in Vergennes and Middlebury, is likely to commence in 2021, barring any unforeseen delays in construction of the downtown Middlebury rail tunnel.

For about a decade VTTrans has, with federal grant funding, been steadily working with the Vermont Rail System – the private freight railroad that operates over state-owned tracks – to upgrade tracks, signaling, and grade crossings for the extension of inter-city passenger rail service from Rutland to Burlington, the state's largest city.

All that is left to do is replacing two aging bridges with a tunnel in downtown Middlebury (a project is scheduled for completion by July 2021) and building the new stations. The Burlington terminal will be at historic Union Station at the downtown waterfront; but there's a controversy brewing over where to keep the train when it overnights in the city.

Once this last work is done, the New York State and Vermont state-supported Amtrak *Ethan Allen Express*, a once daily New York City-Albany-Saratoga-Rutland run, will be extended to Burlington. This will provide both the eastern (*The Vermonter*) and western (*Ethan Allen*) sides of the Green Mountain State with Amtrak service to New York City. In addition, the Vermont Shires Connector provides Amtrak Thruway bus service from the Albany-Rensselaer station to

Bennington and Manchester in Southwestern Vermont.

Long-term there are plans to extend the *Vermonter* to Montreal, Quebec, once a US/Canada pre-clearance customs and border inspection facility is built in Montreal Central Station. There is also completed studies for a second frequency along the *Vermonter* route that would end in Boston, and for an extension of a New York-Albany train to Bennington and Manchester via the Pan Am Southern freight line through Mechanicville, NY.

*Ben Turon*

## MTA Studying Passenger Service on LIRR- Owned Freight Line

The MTA is studying a plan to bring commuter passenger trains back to the Bay Ridge Branch, a stretch of Long Island Railroad between Bay Ridge and Queens that's been utilized only for freight for the past 95 years. The branch, which opened in 1876, runs from Fresh Pond Yards in Ridgewood through East New York, Flatbush, Midwood and Bensonhurst, before ending in Bay Ridge.

If the branch were to reopen to commuters, it would be the first step toward realizing the larger “Triboro RX” plan, a 24-mile passenger rail line first proposed in 1996 by the urban research nonprofit Regional Plan Association. The Triboro would loop around the city through a patchwork of existing rail lines, where passenger trains share tracks with freights.

## Amtrak Reports Record Ridership; New York Ridership Up on All Lines

Amtrak reports it carried a record number of passengers in its 2019 fiscal year ending September 30, 2019. Ridership increased to 32.5 million, a gain of 800,000 passengers or 2.5 percent. By major business lines, there was growth of: 4.3 percent on *Acelas* trains, 2.9 percent on Northeast Regional trains and 2.4 percent on State Supported services. Long Distance lines saw nearly one percent more passengers.

The national passenger service said total operating revenue was \$3.3 billion, a rise of 3.6 percent over fiscal year 2018. Operating performance was said to be the best operating performance in Amtrak history by reducing the operating deficit to \$29.8 million. Capital investment totalled \$1.6 billion, 9.4 percent more than last year.

“We are growing and modernizing Amtrak,” said Amtrak Board Chair Tony Coscia. “These changes have put us on track to break even in 2020, which would be a first in Amtrak history.”

There were ridership gains on all Amtrak routes running through Albany, according to an article in the *Albany Times Union*. The Empire Corridor west of Albany, including the Toronto bound *Maple Leaf*, carried 390,355 riders -- a 6.5 percent increase. The Empire Corridor south of Albany to New York City saw 1,214,206 passengers, a gain of 5.5 percent. *Adirondack* service ridership between Montreal from New York was up 5.5 percent, while the New York City to Rutland, Vermont *Ethan Allen Express* passenger count increased 1.7 percent.

*Tony Rudmann*

## THE GREAT NEW YORK STATE MODEL TRAIN FAIR & ESPA



**Left to Right: Guy Crompt, Mike McNulty and Connell Raate at The Great New York State Model Train Fair – Photo by Ben Turon**

As in many past years, ESPA had a meaningful presence at “The Great New York State Model Train Fair” at the New York State Fairgrounds in Geddes on the weekend of November 2nd and 3rd. But such things do not happen in a vacuum and specific thanks are offered to a number of our representatives listed below, both local and those who came from a considerable distance.

Firstly, ESPA must thank the Central New York Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society (NRHS) who has sponsored this event for 45 years now. They provided free tables to us in an excellent location.

To Bruce Becker who maintains the travelling ESPA display unit that, when assembled, instantly creates a “home” to work from during events like this one. The display adds an instant ESPA presence for us to attract visitors.

To Connell Raate and Guy Crompt, ESPA members from the Syracuse area that have been stalwarts at the Train Fair with me for years now.

To Ben Turon, ESPA's vice-president and Mike McNulty who drove some distance to lend a big hand. Ben also took dozens of great photographs that he later posted to ESPA's Facebook Page that he so aptly maintains for us. Those pictures document the event at large and shows everyone just why the general public keeps coming back each year to the train fair!

Bob Lenz, our *ESPA Express* editor who provided current and past copies of our newsletter.

Likewise, *New York by Rail*® magazine is another favorite “give-away” that the crowds are eager to pick up – Kudos to its publisher Tom Martinelli!

To Andy Cabal who collected the travelling display after the train show ended and shipped it back to Bruce the day after. Of course, Andy also logged in new sign-ups!

The Syracuse Train Fair is always well attended and starts things off for the Christmas Toy Train Season! Thanks to our volunteers, that season will remind Train Fair goers that ESPA is up and running as well! *Stanley J. Kozaczka*

## DEC Releases (Cont'd from page 1)

including The Wild Center (a natural history museum) and the Big Tupper Ski Area.

However, having Tupper Lake as the Travel Corridor terminus pales by comparison to the more prominent Adirondack Mountain villages of Saranac Lake and (world-renowned) Lake Placid – site of the 1932 and 1980 Winter Olympics, which would permanently lose any railroad access if the DEC's Unit Management Plan Amendment is enacted.

It should be remembered that the ASR operated regular summer and fall season excursion trains between Saranac Lake and Lake Placid for many years until DEC's decision to change the Unit Management Plan, and forced the railroad to stop running its trains and remove equipment that for years operated on the northern portion of the Travel Corridor.

In the DEC press release on the amendment to the Unit Management Plan, Adirondack Railway Preservation Society President Bill Branson stated:

*“This extraordinary investment assures the ability to extend accessible passenger rail excursion and scenic services, and their related economic development benefits, to Tupper Lake and the northern region of the Adirondacks. The Adirondack Railway Preservation Society and its large body of riders, volunteers, and supporters look forward to continued initiatives supporting the success of the Adirondack Scenic Railroad.”*

However, this quote, according to a following letter from Mr. Branson to ASR supporters, was taken out of context by the DEC. “*We were misled,*” stated Mr. Branson on behalf of the board of the Adirondack Railway Preservation Society.

The railroad believed that their provided statement was to support a DEC press release announcing only the agency's support for Utica-Tupper Lake rail upgrades, not the entire DEC sponsored amendment to the 1996 Remsen-Lake Placid Unit Management Plan.

The inclusion of the quote in news articles on the DEC's press release seems to wrongly imply that a final agreement had been reached between the ASR and DEC.

This is not the case, as the Adirondack Railway Preservation Society still opposes the DEC-plan to convert the Lake Placid-Saranac Lake-Tupper Lake section into a trail.

Mr. Branson clarified that while supporting the proposed rail upgrades, that “*there has been no settlement*” and the “*ASR reserves the option to again pursue legal action*”. Given the time required for additional review, issuing of contracts, and possible continuing legal action, construction isn't expected until 2021 at the earliest.

ESPA has supported – including donating money and submitting written comments – the efforts by the ASR to preserve rail access to Lake Placid.

Public comments on the Unit Management Plan can be sent to the state government by mail to John Schmid, NYSDEC, 625 Broadway, Albany, NY, 12233; or e-mailed to [adirondackpark@dec.ny.gov](mailto:adirondackpark@dec.ny.gov). *Ben Turon*

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## MTA to spend \$5B on Accessibility for Subway Stations

Many subway stations in New York City only have stairs, no elevators or escalators for those with physical mobility issues, including users of wheelchairs. The Metropolitan Transit Agency wants to fix that, and its going to cost a lot.

According to the *New York Times*, only about a quarter of New York City's 472 subway stations are wheelchair accessible, one of the lowest percentages of any major transit system in the world. Other newer transit systems in Washington and San Francisco are fully accessible, and more than half of the stations in Chicago and Boston with older systems are accessible to people with disabilities.

After being criticized in the media and sued in court for renovating stations without making them accessible – a violation of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act – the MTA is saying it will now act. Andy Byford, CEO of NYC Transit, has made accessibility a top priority. The plan is to add elevators at 70 stations in the next five years at a cost \$5.5 billion.

The MTA has estimated that the cost to upgrade the accessibility of the century-old transit system comes to about \$78 million per station. The cost is mostly not for the lifts themselves, but the need to relocate and rebuild existing stairs, walls, and utilities at the stations. Also, stations tend to have multiple levels and long passageways, requiring multiple lifts to go from street to platform.

The agency has released a list of the 48 stations where it wants to build elevators first, including: 21 in Brooklyn, 12 in Manhattan, 6 in the Bronx, 6 in Queens and 3 on the Staten Island Railway. Transit officials also noted that the current 2015-19 capital plan has installing 59 elevators at 25 stations.

The *Times* reports that transit advocates are criticizing the high costs for installing elevators, arguing that the MTA could build more if it could do the work for less (such as in Boston, where a project adding three elevators and two escalators cost only \$36 million). In Manhattan, a developer for \$10 million built to two new elevators to the subway, in return for an allowance of constructing a larger skyscraper then permitted by zoning. In Chicago, however, four elevators at a new transit station did cost \$75 million.

The *Times* also notes that even current subway stations with elevators don't always have working elevators. According to the newspaper, only about 94 percent of elevators were available in August, and only 87 percent of escalators were working, the worst performance in years according to transit agency's statistics.

Still, the news of making the NYC Subway more accessible is welcome progress. The upgraded stations will be a Godsend to the handicap, the elderly, parents with small children, and those with heavy bags or parcels. The MTA states that the goal is for no rider to be farther than two stops from an accessible station, with the prioritizing of stations with high ridership and train/bus transfers.

*Ben Turon*

### ***ESPA's Goals for Empire Service*** (Cont'd from page 1)

pressure and reports from the railroad's own inspector general, Amtrak has greatly improved the cost-recovery for

its café car services; its food service on the Northeast Corridor now earns a small profit.

Reopening the shuttered commissary at the Albany-Rensselaer Station would have the additional benefit of allowing restocking of trains that travel to Western NY, Montreal, and Vermont. Expansion of food service would also allow the increased promotion and sale of *Taste NY* items currently stocked on Empire Corridor trains by Amtrak at the request of the state.

### **Onboard Cleaning**

For several years ESPA has proposed that Amtrak base a team of cleaners at Albany-Rensselaer who would board Empire Corridor trains at the station and clean them en-route. These cleaners could detrain at Utica, catching a return train east that they would also clean.

Due to the length of train trips in both time and distance from Penn Station to Niagara Falls, restrooms can become unpleasant and garbage bins can fill up. Having them refreshed mid-way through journeys would be a small but meaningful way to improve on-board service, making rail a more attractive alternative to driving or flying.

### **Baggage Cars**

ESPA proposes that NYSDOT negotiate with Amtrak to add baggage cars to the NYC-Niagara Falls **Maple Leaf**, as PennDOT has recently done for the state-supported *Pennsylvanian*. Currently the *Lake Shore Limited* provides checked baggage service to several Upstate stations; adding a second frequency offering such service on the Empire Corridor is desirable.

It would first improve safety and wheelchair access by addressing the problem of excess luggage piling up in the areas reserved for wheelchair passengers, as well as in the center aisles and car end vestibules. It would also allow for the transport of bicycles, skis, hockey sticks, and other recreational equipment.

### **Adding Seats**

There is a significant lack of seats at peak travel times in the Empire Corridor. The easiest and cheapest way to fix this is to add coaches to existing trains. Currently many trains sell out, especially south of Albany and on holidays. High demand south of Albany makes it hard to find seats for travel north and west of Albany.

In the short term, NYSDOT should negotiate with Amtrak for an increase in the current pool of coaches dedicated to the Empire Corridor in order to increase train lengths.

In the long term, NYSDOT should work to replace and expand the coach fleet for the Empire Corridor as Amtrak moves forward with replacement of its current 40-year old Amfleet coaches with new "single-level corridor" equipment. Increased ridership would improve cost-recovery and provide an environmentally friendly alternative to driving and flying.

### **Travel Packages**

NYSDOT and I Love NY® should negotiate with Amtrak to allow more promotional fares and travel packages in New York State.

Amtrak offers promotional fare codes within its reservation system allowing vacation travel providers to offer discounted tickets and travel packages at off-peak travel times.

Maine has acquired this tool to boost travel on its state-supported Boston-Portland-Brunswick *Downeaster* service. Establishing an Amtrak promotional “V-Code” for the Empire Corridor could allow discount travel packages for Upstate destinations overlooked by Amtrak Vacation Packages but served by Amtrak, just as is done in Maine today.

### Dual-Mode Locomotives

The current fleet of Amtrak owned dual-mode diesel-electric locomotives that serve the Empire Corridor, enabling trains from Upstate to enter the non-diesel electric territory of Penn Station and East River tunnels, need to be replaced.

Acquired in the 1990s, the current fleet of 18 locomotives is surpassing their 20-year service life after very intense utilization. The average failure rate in service for the dual-mode locomotive fleet is increasing, leading to more frustrating delays for passengers.

NYSDOT should enter into a joint-procurement with Metro-North – also a dual-mode locomotive user – for a new fleet that would ideally not only replace the current fleet, but expand it to allow an increase in train frequency and provide enough spare locomotives so that more routine maintenance can be undertaken in the future.

### Pre-clearance at Montreal

The Canadian Parliament recently ratified a treaty with the United States allowing for joint US-Canada customs to be done at Montreal Central Station, so that Amtrak's NYC-Montreal Adirondack could eliminate the need for its current, lengthy stop at the international frontier.

Customs pre-clearance will require building a dedicated facility within the existing Montreal station for the *Adirondack*, and for a future extension of the *Vermont*. NYSDOT should follow up and work with the stakeholders to see that this worthy project proceeds forward to completion.

### Develop a Strong State Rail Program

New York State's Inter-city Rail Program has stalled since the completion of federally funded infrastructure projects from the Obama Administration. Since the institution of PRIIA Section 209, the state has merely funded Amtrak's status quo operation, with inadequate oversight, lack of contractual service quality requirements and no multi-year operating or capital programs.

While ESPA acknowledges the State's significant investment in new stations in Upstate New York and the receipt and implementation of large ARRA/TIGER grants for several major projects – including the Albany-Schenectady second track and track and platform work at the Rensselaer station – no major plans exist beyond these completed actions.

The state needs to select new rail improvement projects to undertake. Worthy rail projects that would reduce travel times and increase reliability can be found in the 2005 Hudson Line Railroad Corridor Transportation Plan, the

2009 State Rail Plan (which needs to be updated to comply to federal law), and the yet to be finalized Empire Corridor High Speed Rail EIS, which is going on year ten without completion or release.

In addition, there are potential new station projects at Amsterdam (currently under study by the city government) and at Dunkirk (proposed). Lastly, the Livingston Avenue Bridge (LAB) that crosses the Hudson River between Albany and Rensselaer is in need of replacement.

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

Other states have impressive programs for their state-supported Section 209 trains and have large and capable organizations overseeing passenger rail. Washington State has a large rail division within its DOT; Maine created an independent rail authority; Virginia created an entirely new agency for rail and public transportation.

NYSDOT needs to increase the staffing and budget for the currently small state rail division.

### State Climate Act

Lastly, the state needs to begin to examine how passenger rail will meet the mandates of the recently passed state Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act. Currently, passenger rail is an environmentally friendly mode of public transport; encouraging a modal shift to passenger rail from personal cars and airplanes will reduce emissions in the medium-term.

However, to achieve net-carbon neutral passenger rail transport, the state will need to begin investigating the expansion of electrification beyond downstate commuter rail lines, and/or the development of new non-fossil fuel/emission-free locomotives, powered by batteries or hydrogen fuel cells.

*Ben Turon*

## GO GREEN

Members providing their e-mail address are entitled to the full-color, electronic version of the *ESPA Express* newsletter at the same time we forward the paper version to the printer. (ESPA will NOT share your information with anyone.) Receive the newsletter one to two weeks earlier.

Our postage and printing cost savings will give ESPA more resources to further its passenger rail advocacy mission.

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### ESPA Working Group & Meeting

ALL ESPA members (and other interested persons) are welcome and encouraged to attend. Please contact President Gary Prophet at [thegpn@aol.com](mailto:thegpn@aol.com) for more information or if you are planning on attending a meeting. Advance registration is required!

#### Meetings:

Sat, Jan 11 or Jan 18, 2020: TBD.

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

Check [www.esparail.org](http://www.esparail.org), for the most current information on meeting times and venues...

ALL dates, locations and times are subject to change...

### ESPA/RPA Member Discount

If you are a member of ESPA and RPA can save \$5 on their ESPA membership fee for Renewal or higher member levels (Renew for \$19 instead of the regular \$24)

### ESPA MEMBERSHIP NEW OR RENEWAL

The Empire State Passengers Association is a volunteer network of people working to improve intercity rail, mass transit and bus service in New York State.

- Introductory membership (\$10.00 for one year)
- Renewal membership (\$24.00 per year)
- Renewal - Student, Senior, Fixed-Income (\$12.50 per year)
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Check [www.esparail.org](http://www.esparail.org), for the most current information on meeting times and venues...

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Email: [www.rwlens4@gmail.com](mailto:www.rwlens4@gmail.com) Deadling for material for Winter Issue is January 6, 2020

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