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Biden, McCain Agree: \$1.8 Billion for Amtrak

In a Senate floor colloquy October 11, Senators Joseph Biden (D-DE) and John McCain (R-AZ) said they agreed that Amtrak should get \$1.8 billion for safety and security. McCain also agreed that he would not object to an appropriation for this, even if the Senate failed to authorize the funds.

The deal was buttressed by a commitment from Senator Robert Byrd, Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, that—if the bill authorizing these funds does not pass the full Senate—he would appropriate funds without an authorization.

The following two Amtrak requests seem assured of inclusion: \$998 million for fire and life safety in the New York, Baltimore and Washington tunnels; \$515 million “for systemwide security upgrades, including hiring and training

additional police officers, canine-assisted units, and surveillance equipment.”

The day before, McCain and Gordon Smith (R-OR) introduced a bill authorizing those two elements, which total \$1.513 billion. The above quotation is from their bill, the “Rail Transportation Safety and Security Act” (S.1528).

The colloquy came during consideration of the aviation safety bill. Biden said he agreed not to press further to get Amtrak money in that bill, and Senate Commerce Chairman Ernest Hollings (D-SC) and Ranking Member McCain agreed to handle the Amtrak bill separately the next week.

The Biden/McCain deal would give Amtrak 56% of the \$3.2 billion safety/security/capacity package it developed in response to the request from 16 Senators (Sept. *News*). Significantly, Amtrak revised that request to include acquisition of new long-distance cars after Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) complained that the package was too Northeast oriented. Those cars are unlikely to be part of the \$1.8 billion deal, but Amtrak’s willingness to request them reflects continuing, increased demand for long-distance rail travel. ■

Rocky Mount Revitalization

Renovation work at the Amtrak station in Rocky Mount, NC, was dedicated May 11. The event was attended by Governor Mike Easley, state Transportation Secretary Lyndo Tippet, Amtrak Intercity President Ed Walker, Carolinas Association for Passenger Trains President Martin Wheeler, Jr., and many others.



—NC DOT Rail Division

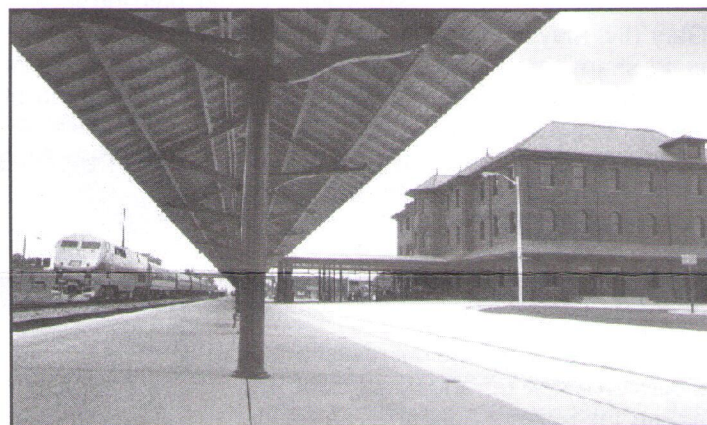
Amtrak Intercity President Ed Walker and North Carolina Rail Division Director Pat Simmons (at left) and Amtrak Atlantic Coast Service General Manager Jay McArthur (far right) attended the May 11 dedication in Rocky Mount.

Ten years ago, the *Telegram* newspaper said the station walls “loom darkly and separate from the rest of the town,” and noted that the near-vacant building did not make a good first impression on arriving passengers. The city bought the station in 1995 and planned a \$9.4-million project to restore it and convert it into an intermodal facility, most funds

coming from the federal TEA-21 enhancements program. The Federal Transit Administration paid for much of the work at the adjacent Railway Express Agency building, now used for intercity and local bus service.

Amtrak serves Rocky Mount with the *Carolinian* and all three New York-Florida Silver Service trains.

Besides transportation uses, the building houses a news-



—Donald M. Stewart, Jr.

Newly renovated station at Rocky Mount, NC, looking south, serving Amtrak and intercity and local buses.

stand, the Nash County Travel and Tourism Department, the Rocky Mount Chamber of Commerce, and several other smaller groups. It is a key piece of a larger downtown revitalization effort, that accelerated after Hurricane Floyd in 1999. The storm prompted several attractions to relocate downtown, which had been unaffected by flood damage.

The core of the station was built by the Wilmington and Western Railroad in 1903. It was much enlarged in 1912 and 1916 by successor company Atlantic Coast Line. It remained an important division headquarters until it was vacated by CSX (a later successor) in 1984. ■

RIDE-21: Doubts About Impact

"Mark me down for all of the above. I support H.R. 1020 (aid to regional and short freight lines), the High Speed Rail Investment Act (HSRIA), and RIDE-21."

—Rep. Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY)

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Railroads had an October 2 hearing mainly on rail passenger investment. Subcommittee Chairman Jack Quinn (R-NY), full committee ranking member Jim Oberstar (D-MN) and Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) expressed views similar to Boehlert's.

The hearing reviewed Chairman Don Young's (R-AK) new bill, RIDE-21 (Sept. News). Young criticized HSRIA for not having enough money and for giving too much control to Amtrak. He said RIDE-21 solves those problems and eliminates "all the obstacles" in the existing RRIF loan program.

Oberstar said of HSRIA, "...If we'd introduced a bill with \$70-80 million in tax credits, we'd be laughed out of the House. Since we introduced the bill, it's been criticized as not providing enough. We'll increase that. Happy to do that."

Witnesses welcomed RIDE-21's introduction of a much higher dollar figure (\$71 million) to the debate, but doubted that the bill would lead to high speed rail investment. Several noted that states already have the right to sell tax-exempt bonds for high speed rail but have not done so. David King of North Carolina DOT—representing the "States for Passenger Rail"—said, "an informal poll of our 21 states found that issues of affordability and lack of federal partnership are the main reasons no bonds have been sold."

Bob Clement (D-TN), ranking subcommittee member, said, "This bill basically raises the states' credit limit." Oberstar complained that RIDE-21 "shifts all the burden onto the states." Gary (IN) Mayor Scott King illustrated the sharp increase in state share that tax-exempt bonds (RIDE-21) would mean compared with tax-credit bonds (HSRIA). On \$1 billion of bonds, he figured that annual debt service on tax exempts would be \$78 million a year (assuming 5% rate, amortized over 30 years), while with tax credits the state could choose between a one-time \$200 million payment or annual debt service of just \$16 million.

The mayor said, "It is not realistic that states will pick up additional debt [by selling tax-exempt bonds]. The headlines today in Indiana are about a growing deficit in a state that several months ago had one of the strongest budgetary situations in the nation." Chairman Quinn replied, "The headlines in Buffalo today are similar to those in Indiana." Quinn also again identified himself as a strong Amtrak supporter.

Nevada State Treasurer Brian Krolicki, representing the National Association of State Treasurers, said tax exempt bonds are familiar to investors; there is a strong secondary market and good liquidity, unlike for tax credit bonds.

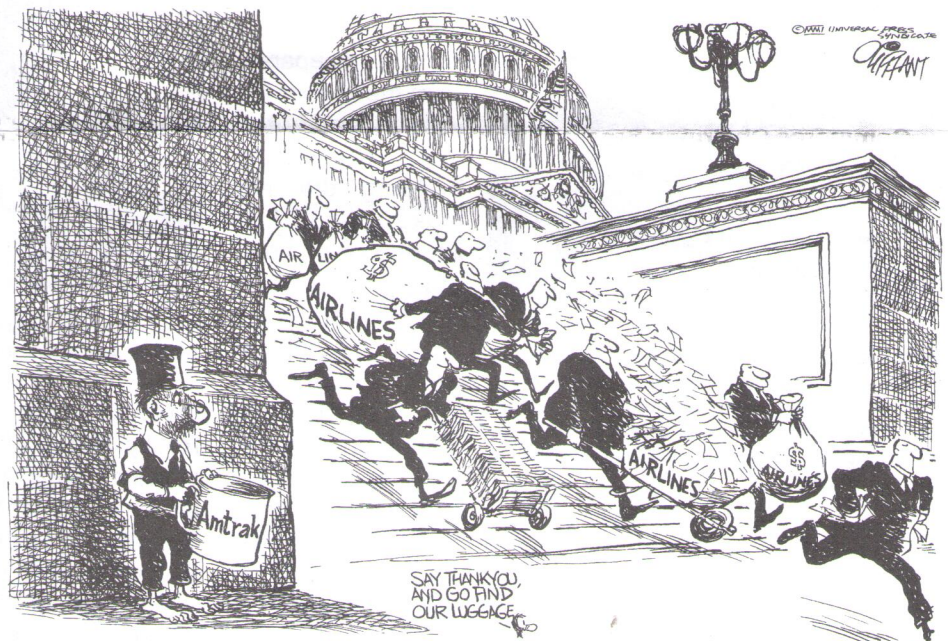
David King, however, expressed doubt that the liquidity issue was significant enough to mitigate the bigger burden that RIDE-21 places on the states, and the resulting lack of a level playing field for rail vs. the other modes.

James Z. Query of Morgan Stanley (the bond expert who also testified at Rep. Houghton's 2000 hearing on HSRIA, August 2000 News) said Krolicki was not in conflict with the other witnesses, but—echoing the two Kings—Query said the "real impediment" with RIDE-21 is its lack of new revenues to meet debt service. He suggested deleting the speed requirement and qualifying any corridor that U.S. DOT has designated.

David King said most states are planning for 110 mph. He said, for 100-300-mile markets, "the benefits of going from 110 to 125 mph [RIDE-21's standard] were not significant before September 11, and probably are less so now." He opined that 125 mph virtually guarantees the need for a new alignment and a full EIS. "The cost-effectiveness of those very expensive minutes [above 110 mph] is not there."

David King said the 8,300 route miles of designated corridors have 12,000 grade crossings and a conservative estimate is \$3 million per grade separation. He urged the committee to recognize the benefits of "managing" crossings, that is, making safety improvements short of elimination. "We believe you get 99% of the safety value for 3% of the cost" using the management approach.

Earlier, Dennis Sullivan, chair of the Railway Progress Institute's Committee on Passenger Transportation, urged "Congress to work with states to make sure there is a proper balance of state and federal funding. The goals (grade-crossing-free, 125 mph) are laudable, but these types of systems exist only in Japan and Europe. The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative contemplates an incremental approach and should not be excluded." ■



Return of the Streetcar?

Twenty years ago—July 26, 1981—with the opening of the San Diego Trolley, the light-rail movement came to the U.S. This followed closely the opening of two light-rail lines in Canada—Edmonton in 1978 and Calgary earlier in 1981.

Light rail looked and acted much like the streetcars once common in all U.S. cities—both run on tracks that can be used in many environments (streets, reserved lanes, medians, tunnels, bridges, etc.), powered by overhead, electric wires. However, technologically, light rail was a “great leap forward” from the old streetcar systems, benefiting from design advances and efficiencies achieved in Europe in the decades since streetcar development ended in the U.S.

Only seven U.S. streetcar systems made it to 1981—Boston, Newark, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, New Orleans, San Francisco—largely using 1930’s technology on much reduced networks. All survive today, with some improvement; the last system abandonment was El Paso in 1973.

To the extent that U.S. cities planned for rail transit in the 1960’s and 1970’s, the focus was on modern versions of the subway—heavy rail, called “metros” in some cities. Heavy rail offers high capacity, but also brings high costs and limited route flexibility, so cities that could not afford heavy-rail systems tried to incorporate some of the lower-cost, higher-flexibility features once offered by streetcars.

Thus came the rise of light rail. Since San Diego in 1981, light rail lines have opened in Buffalo, Portland (OR), Sacramento, San Jose, Los Angeles, Baltimore, St. Louis, Denver, Dallas, Salt Lake City, and Jersey City. Generally, routes tended to cover longer distances at higher speeds, with fewer stops and less street-running, than the former streetcar routes. New systems are now under construction in San Juan, Minneapolis, and Houston; also, a non-electric version is now being built between Trenton and Camden.

At the same time, a few cities revived short streetcar segments with old cars—sometimes as historical curiosities,

HOLLINGS INTRODUCES “RAIL-21”

Joining the debate over Amtrak’s future, Senate Commerce Chairman Ernest F. Hollings (D-SC) on October 11 introduced the Railroad Advancement and Infrastructure Law of the 21st Century (RAIL-21). S.1530 authorizes \$1.2 billion for capital and operations in fiscal 2003, eliminates Amtrak’s operating self-sufficiency requirement, and funds Amtrak’s \$3.2 billion safety/security/capacity package (now likely to be \$1.8 billion, see lead story).

Drawing on “RIDE-21,” the bill also authorizes \$35 billion in direct loans and guarantees for freight rail, passenger rail and rail security enhancements; \$350 million in grants for short line railroads; and \$50 million a year (2002-04) for Swift Act high speed rail.

“I particularly want to thank my friend from Arizona [McCain, R] who is all for safety but not so much all for Amtrak. He has been very helpful here.”

—Sen. Joseph Biden (D-DE), Oct. 11, on Senate floor announcing agreement with Sen. McCain



—Portland Streetcar

The new Portland Streetcar on a test run earlier this summer.

sometimes as a tool to revive neighborhoods or provide access to activity areas, or both. Such lines are in Dallas, Seattle, Tucson, Memphis, San Francisco, Charlotte, Detroit, Fort Collins (CO), Kenosha (WI). There are expansion plans in Dallas, Tucson, Memphis, and San Francisco; and one line is now under construction in Tampa.

Growing acceptance of a traditional-type streetcar service is indicated by the July 20 opening of the Portland Streetcar in Oregon. It runs roughly north-south, in the central part of the city, for 2.5 miles (in a 4.7-mile “loop” on paired, parallel streets). It intersects the east-west Tri-Met MAX light-rail line in the heart of downtown. Unlike the other “new” streetcar lines, Portland Streetcar uses new cars based on modern, low-floor, European design, built by Skoda in the Czech Republic. This design, among other things, makes life easier for those with baby carriages.

The line was built by the non-profit Portland Streetcar, Inc., is owned by the city, coordinates with Tri-Met transit fares, and uses Tri-Met drivers. Promoters expect it to increase neighborhood development in a more people-friendly, less auto-dependent way. The construction budget was \$57 million, increased from earlier estimates by the city’s wish to extend the line through the campus of Portland State University.

Ridership projections started at 2,700 a day and were increased to 5,000 by the time the line opened. By the end of July, daily ridership was 6,000-8,000 (5,000 on Sundays).

A similar line in downtown Tacoma is under construction and will open in 2003. In Milwaukee, after years of debate and suburban opposition, planners have scaled back consideration of a light-rail network to one or two enhanced, central-city transit lines. Rail opponents are still pressing for the city to do nothing, or to use cheaper (but less attractive to users) high-tech buses, claiming streetcars are hopelessly outdated and inefficient. But a modern-streetcar success story in Portland could prove them wrong. ■

HOUSE MEMBERS GET FAST TRAIN RIDE

“Yesterday, well over 100 members of Congress visited the World Trade Center site in New York City [by train]. From brake release to brake application, we took 2:41 going up (one-stop) and 2:31 on the return (non-stop). Many businesses are now putting their key personnel on Acela because point-to-point it’s less time than flying. It’s a scene that should be repeated all around America.”

—Rep. Jim Oberstar (D-MN), at October 2 hearing (p. 2)

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Timetable changes—The next general timetable change for both the Northeast Corridor and the rest of the Amtrak system will likely be December 9.

However, effective October 28, the *Texas Eagle* will have a significant schedule lengthening—almost all between St. Louis and Fort Worth—due to deteriorated track conditions in Missouri and delays from running against the flow of freight trains in northeast Texas. Southbound, 2:45 is added (including 0:58 Longview-Dallas); northbound, 1:10 is added (including 0:45 Little Rock-St. Louis). The *Eagle* will miss the important

Empire Builder connection at Chicago both ways.

Southern Arizona changes—Maricopa station opens with the *Sunset Limiteds* that originate October 28. Maricopa will be staffed, but, the Tucson-Phoenix bus connections will be discontinued, and the staffed Amtrak office at Phoenix will be closed.

Though Maricopa is much closer to Phoenix than Tucson is—30 vs. 117 miles—Maricopa's lack of public transportation, taxis, and rental cars makes it useless to arriving passengers who are not being met. For such passengers, the longer bus ride from Tucson at least served to get them where they were headed.

STIMULUS PACKAGE?—Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) wrote President Bush on October 9, urging inclusion of \$27 billion in transportation projects in any stimulus package, including Amtrak's \$3.2 billion security/capacity request, \$5

billion each for highways and mass transit, \$12 billion for high-speed rail (\$1.2 billion a year for 10 years), \$1.5 billion for airport construction and \$300 million for marine ferry and terminal construction.

HOW TO JOIN THE NARP BOARD

To become one of NARP's 70 regional directors, send your statement of candidacy not exceeding 75 words, plus name, address, phone number(s), e-mail address. Candidates must have been NARP members for at least a year. First-time candidates must provide letters of recommendation from three other NARP members living in their region. Directors serve two-year terms.

Send items to "NARP Candidate," 900 2nd St., NE, #308; Washington, DC 20002 (not to P.O. box on our reply envelopes!), postmarked by December 31, 2001—or hand-carried, faxed, or e-mailed by January 4, 2002.

Ballots containing the statements will be sent to each NARP member. Elections will take place at regional meetings and by mail. Future board meetings include Washington, DC, April 25-27, 2002 (and April 2003); Emeryville, CA, October 2002.

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