



Mineta's Testimony on '05 Appropriations

With the 2005 appropriations season underway, Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta has appeared at two hearings to discuss the Bush Administration's proposals. He testified March 3 before the House Transportation/Treasury Appropriations Subcommittee, chaired by Ernest Istook (R.-Okla.); and March 9 before the Senate counterpart, chaired by Richard Shelby (R.-Ala.).

Mineta told both panels that Amtrak should get no more than \$900 million in

2004 under any circumstance, and that the Administration would propose \$1.4 billion in 2006 if the Administration's "reform" legislation is enacted. No such bill has been introduced in the House; a Senate bill, S.1501, was introduced July 30, 2003, but has no co-sponsors (July '03 News).

Both facts argue against the likelihood of such legislation passing in this Congress, so, in effect, the Bush Administration appears to support a funding limit of \$900 million for the foreseeable future—

even though Amtrak repeatedly has called that a shutdown figure. That level is 26% below the \$1.218 billion enacted for 2004 and just half of what Amtrak says it needs to continue bringing the existing service to a state of good repair (Feb. News).

If Amtrak cannot survive on \$900 million in 2005, Sen. Patty Murray (D.-Wash.) asked Mineta how waiting until 2006 for higher funding—assuming the Administration got the "reforms" it wanted—would work. Mineta would only say, "We still hold by the need for reform."

Similarly, when Shelby asked, "What is the long-term plan for the Administration if your authorization proposal is not enacted?", Mineta answered, "Our reform package is very, very important."

On March 3, Mineta said that Orlando-Los Angeles rail passengers could be flown "faster and cheaper" than the \$469 subsidy per passenger he claimed for the *Sunset Limited*. This source of this figure is unclear. It is far higher than others cited earlier. Amtrak's 2003 figures indicate \$289, a 13% improvement from 2002.

Still, a hypothetical Orlando-Los Angeles air fare is irrelevant to passengers traveling between the dozens of other city-pairs on that route or to the many passengers connecting from other trains to the *Sunset*. The whole concept of using "per-passenger" subsidies to measure trains' performance is faulty; "passenger-mile" is the standard for intercity travel.

Rep. John Olver (D.-Mass.) asked Mineta whether there was any evidence that any private operators were interested in running long-distance trains "without major subsidy" and whether freight railroads would cooperate with such operators. Mineta claimed that a private operator was already running passenger trains in Washington and Oregon.

Perhaps he is confusing Amtrak's state-supported Cascades service (and long-distance trains) with the seasonal *Lewis and Clark Explorer* excursion train

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GAO Examines Boston Electrification

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a report, "Amtrak's Management of Northeast Corridor Improvements Demonstrates Need for Applying Best Practices," on February 27. The report was addressed to and requested by Senate Commerce Chairman John McCain (R.-Ariz.).

The report considers improvements made under Amtrak's Northeast High-Speed Rail Improvement Project, which followed the first federal appropriation earmarked for extending electrification from New Haven to Boston (in fiscal 1991).

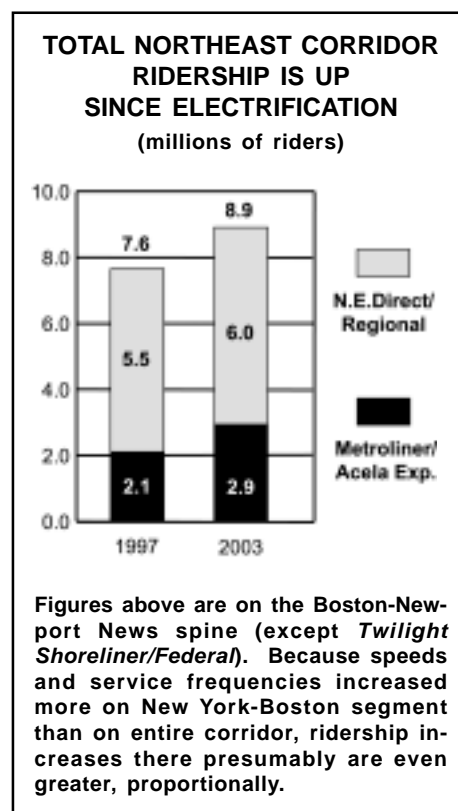
The GAO focuses on a 1994 "master plan" prepared by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), as called for by the 1992 Amtrak reauthorization law. That law called for a plan for New York-Boston service in three hours or less. The GAO examines the ways in which today's service doesn't meet the goals of the 1994 master plan. However, Amtrak never adopted the master plan.

In any event, in terms of passenger benefits, completion of the electrification was more important than the three-hour goal. First, many more passengers can (and do) use the upgraded, conventional Amtrak service made possible by electrification than would use a three-hour Acela Express. Second, while three-hour service has been seen as ideal for competing with air traffic, the changed

aviation environment since 2001 arguably means that an absolute goal of three-hour travel time has become less important (see charts on pages 1 and 2).

The GAO wrote that Amtrak "relied on annual appropriations to plan work rather

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than on a more comprehensive financial plan that considered long-term funding needs." Of course, Amtrak inhabits a political environment entirely driven by fluctuating, annual appropriations. The GAO report eventually acknowledges that, as well as the fact that from 1992-1998, Amtrak got about \$65 million a year less than what the FRA said was needed to achieve the three-hour goal.

The report also says that while Amtrak "worked closely with stakeholders—commuter railroads and state governments—to coordinate some project work, it did not fully integrate their interests into project goals." It said that in the view of some officials, Amtrak emphasized "work required to accommodate high-speed trains and reduce trip times, but it did little to focus on capacity enhancement or other work needed to accommodate expected growth in commuter and freight rail traffic in future years..."

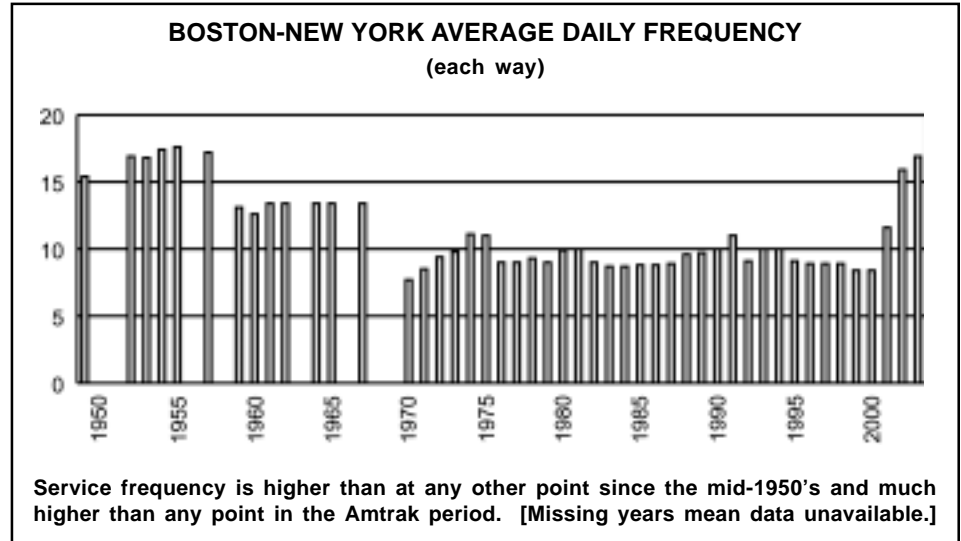
GAO doesn't acknowledge that Amtrak and the other stakeholders have a negotiating relationship in which funding limitations guarantee that all interests cannot get everything they want, when they want it.

The start of electric service to Boston was delayed by three years (compared to the 1994 master plan's goals), but GAO acknowledges that two of those

years were lost due to Amtrak's need to hire a new contractor after the original one went out of business in 1995.

Finally, the GAO says FRA "provided little oversight," and calls for legislation to increase FRA oversight for future

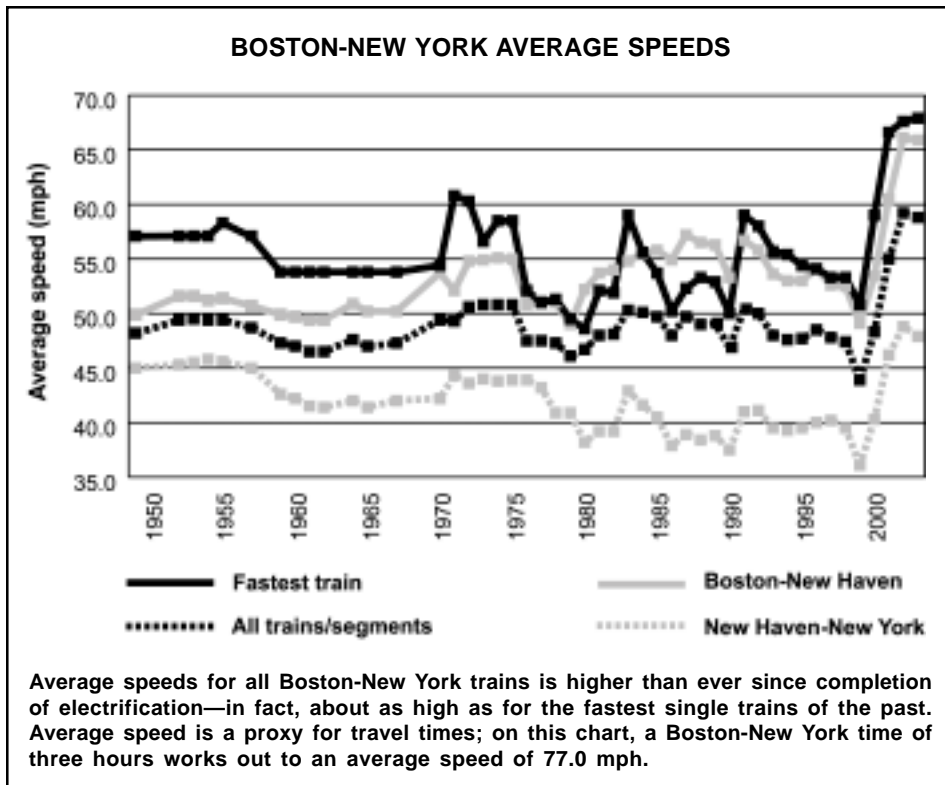
projects. The GAO acknowledges that FRA had this oversight before a 1980 law mandated shifting authority from FRA to Amtrak by 1985, but doesn't adequately explain why FRA oversight deemed undesirable in 1980 is desirable now. n



[Amtrak's current Boston-New York schedule is about 3:25 hours—3:10 is possible when signal work and Metro-North/Connecticut DOT track work now underway is done.]

"It is unclear if the costs of other infrastructure improvements necessary to further reduce the trip-time an additional 10 minutes...would be financially justified by the net ridership increase [they would produce]. The Report fails to adequately account for this change in trip-time goal and the effect it may have had on Amtrak's management of high-speed projects."

—February 12 letter from Amtrak President David Gunn, included as appendix to GAO report



NEW STPP RAIL PAPER

The Surface Transportation Policy Project has a new paper on federal investment in rail infrastructure—"The State of the Nation's Intercity Rail: Federal Investment Could Relieve Congestion and Improve Travel Choice."

STPP outlines the need for such investment, in conjunction with other forms of surface transportation. The report says "dedicated federal investment in the nation's rail infrastructure is critical to America's mobility and economic growth."

It also draws on last year's report by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) in support of federal investment in rail. The report and news release are at <http://www.transact.org>.

Scranton Service Studies Progressing

A long-standing proposal for restoring passenger rail service from the New York City area to Scranton, Pa., got a boost with an earmark in the fiscal 2004 omnibus appropriations package, signed into law January 23. The project has been shepherded along through the years by a coalition of the two states, en-route counties, and others.

The omnibus provides \$2.5 million to be used to complete remaining Federal Transportation Administration environmental and other study work. That should allow engineering plans to begin this summer. Start of construction could happen in 2007, at the earliest.

The \$200-million project would provide rail service parallel to increasingly crowded I-80. The route is the former Lackawanna Railroad mainline, where passenger service (except in commuter territory) was abandoned in 1970. A key segment of track in northwestern New Jersey was torn up in 1984 and needs to be replaced. The state in 1995 obtained title to most of that right-of-way, which is quite straight and largely grade-separated. The segment in Pennsylvania is mostly controlled by local freight authorities.

With the Amtrak tunnels under the Hudson River at capacity, Scranton service may have to terminate at Hoboken. Transfers to Manhattan are possible at Hoboken (PATH/ferry) or Dover (NJT). A Hoboken service could be all-diesel, avoiding the need for dual-mode locomotive or change of locomotives.

Eventual expansion north of Scranton is possible. There is interest in a rail link



The immediate priority is new passenger service from New York to Scranton (via Dover; solid line above), but other services north of Scranton are possible in the longer-term.

from Binghamton to New York; a routing via Scranton would be faster via Port Jervis (proposed in the 1990's). This segment of former Lackawanna line is owned by Canadian Pacific. A Susquehanna County Rail Authority was formed in 2003 to funnel public infrastructure money to the line, though its near-term priorities are freight-related.

Another ex-Lackawanna line runs north of Binghamton to Syracuse. Its owner, New York, Susquehanna & Western, runs a short shuttle service on the north end, in Syracuse, called OnTrack. NYS&W has proposed running a daily Syracuse-Binghamton service, but funding for it has not been identified. n

Silver Service Ride Quality Being Addressed

Rough rides can result both from problems with track or rail car. Of course, when they are pronounced over one section of a line, track is probably the issue.

Ride quality between Savannah and Jacksonville will be addressed later in the spring (see p. 4).

Conditions between Richmond and Fayetteville, N.C., were discussed by NARP Member William S. Crumlish, P.E., of Fayetteville, in a letter to Amtrak.

Amtrak Chief Engineer David J. Hughes, in a June 13, 2003, reply, said CSX Transportation, the line's owner, "inspects the route [at least] twice a week [ed.: as federal regulations require], and

sometimes daily. They check for deviation from both Federal Railroad Administration Track Safety Standards, and from CSXT's own Maintenance of Way Regulations and Instructions. In addition, they periodically measure track conditions dynamically with a Track Geometry Car, [most recently here] on April 29, 2003.

"In addition, CSXT has recently performed major track rehabilitation on 20 miles of track between Wilson, NC, and Fayetteville, NC. As part of this work 43,000 crossties were installed, over 30 miles of new rail installed, and the crosslevel and profile of the existing track adjusted to standards. [Ed.: "Crosslevel"

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(June '03 News). If so, that is ironic, since Amtrak was set to run the service, under state contract. Amtrak pulled itself out of consideration, partly because of concern over restrictions put on Amtrak by the Mineta DOT in 2002 (June '02 News).

Claudia Howells, formerly Oregon DOT's Rail Division Administrator, told the Senate Commerce Committee on October 2, 2003, "We didn't save any money contracting out the Astoria trains [as opposed to using Amtrak]. We had a great short-line operator, great ridership, but it was still a [financial] loss...Costs are pretty much the same no matter who runs it—private or public."

Answering another of Olver's questions, Mineta acknowledged that major railroads aren't interested in multiple passenger operators, but "some of the short lines will [do it]." However, he was not asked to name any corridors that are likely to be developed that would require use of such short lines (as opposed to lines owned by major railroads).

Mineta advocated again running sealed long-distance trains through states that don't help pay for their operations. He said he explained to President Bush in a briefing that's how it should work.

The concept is unworkable because such a service would lose far more in revenue by not serving intermediate points than it would save in reduced operating costs, and shows either that knowledge about passenger rail is in short supply at the DOT, or that the national network simply could not survive implementation of the Administration's approach. n

refers to the height of one rail relative to the height of the rail exactly opposite.] Throughout the next several months, extensive work will continue to reprofile and crosslevel the entire track between Richmond and Delmar, which is 20 miles [north of Rocky Mount].

"CSXT has assured Amtrak that corrective action has been taken to resolve any roughness issues within the segment you identified...Amtrak is committed to providing a safe and comfortable experience for our passengers, and appreciates your input." Hughes closed by saying who to contact at CSX if the poor riding experience is repeated. n

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Cardinal—Amtrak restored sleeper service by March 16, sooner than planned. The lounge serves Acela Express First Class full meals to sleeper passengers (as on *Three Rivers*); coach passengers can buy Stouffer's meals. Checked baggage is still expected to return October 25.

Smoking—Amtrak will expand on April 26 the number of non-smoking trains. Though subject to change, the following still will offer on-board smoking locations: Auto Train, *Crescent*, *Silver Star*, *Silver Meteor*.

Amenities—Amtrak will reintroduce route guides on long-distance trains. Sleeping-car passengers are getting higher-quality towels, thanks to savings from a new laundry-vendor contract. (See Feb. News.)

Baggage fees—Amtrak is raising its baggage storage fees from \$1.50 to \$2.00 per item per day. These fees apply to unclaimed checked baggage and unclaimed Amtrak express items (with the first two full days after arrival still free) and parcel (or "day-check")

storage. Parcel storage at New York Penn Station remains \$4.50.

Trackwork—The last single-track stretch on the Capitol Corridor between Oakland and Sacramento was closed February 29 with the completion of a double-track project on the Yolo Causeway, between Sacramento and Davis.

Sporadic track work through May 8 will cause some morning eastbound and westbound service west of Jefferson City, Mo., to be replaced by buses.

CSX will close parts of the Savannah-Jacksonville line, for part of the day in late April and May, for major track work. To avoid that, Amtrak temporarily will run the southbound *Silver Meteor* three hours earlier than now and run the northbound *Silver Meteor* one hour later than now. Also, Amtrak will turn the *Meteor's* equipment at Washington.

Most *Meteor* passengers ride through Washington, so Amtrak will run a special connecting train north of there using Metroliner equipment and a cross-platform transfer.

Stations—The new Amtrak station at Saratoga Springs, N.Y., built by the

Capital District Transportation Authority, opened March 5.

The waiting room in the renovated Lafayette, La., station is open.

Michigan—Flint and East Lansing, Mich., regained Amtrak station agents on March 1. Port Huron will regain agents April 23.

Amtrak will rename the three Chicago-Pontiac round trips—*Wolverine*, *Lake Cities*, *Twilight Limited*—to *Wolverine Service* with the April 26 timetable change.

Detour—Due to repairs in Moffet Tunnel, the *California Zephyr* will detour between Denver and Salt Lake City via Wyoming. Trains originating in Chicago and Emeryville on the following dates will detour (with the detour itself one day after departure)—June 7-14, 22-29, July 7-14, 22-29. Alternate bus to/from Denver only for Glenwood Springs and Grand Junction.

Transit—New Jersey Transit opened its River Line diesel-light rail service (the nation's first), March 14, Camden (PATCO)-Trenton (Amtrak/NJT/SEPTA).

New Security Bill Offered in Senate

S.2216, the Rail Transportation and Security Act, was introduced March 12 by Sen. Ernest F. Hollings (D.-S.C.).

It would require the Departments of

Homeland Security and Transportation to study aspects of rail passenger and freight security issues, both in the U.S. and abroad. It also authorizes \$777 million for Northeast Corridor tunnel upgrades (similar to previous proposals.

Finally, it picks up on two bills from

2003 from Olympia Snowe (R.-Me., also a sponsor of the new bill) and requires—before completion of the studies—a pilot program for screening of Amtrak passengers and baggage at ten stations.

As in Europe, it's unclear how effective such screening can be unless the entire network (and connecting commuter services) have similar screening. n

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National Association of Railroad Passengers

NARP News

Vol. 38, No. 3

March 2004

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National Association of Railroad Passengers *NARP News* (ISSN 0739-3490), published monthly (except Nov.) by NARP; 900 Second St., NE, Suite 308; Washington, DC 20002-3557; 202/408-8362, fax 202/408-8287, <narp@narprail.org>, <www.narprail.org>. ©2004 National Association of Railroad Passengers. All rights reserved. Membership dues \$30/year (\$16 under 21/over 65), of which \$5 is a subscription to *NARP News*. Periodicals Postage Paid at Washington, D.C., and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes to National Association of Railroad Passengers *NARP News*; 900 Second St., NE, Suite 308; Washington, DC 20002-3557.

(This has news through Mar. 15. Vol. 38, No. 2 was mailed first-class Mar. 1.)