



Rita: Trains Evacuated 738 from Houston

As images from Rita and Katrina showed, American cities are strategically vulnerable to evacuation in times of crisis. Residents get stuck in traffic and run out of gas, grinding any mass departure to a standstill...since the end of the 1950's, transportation officials have pointed out that without alternate forms of transport, not only would emergency evacuation plans be stymied but so would all forms of mobility as well. Which is just what has happened.

—Douglas E. Morris, *Baltimore Sun*
Op-ed, September 29, 2005

Two passenger trains enabled 738 evacuees to leave Houston ahead of Hurricane Rita, without enduring the record traffic jams on Texas interstates. Some motorists took from 20 to 38 hours to get

to Dallas; others gave up and went home.

The rail effort went largely unnoticed by the media, but was reported in the October 1 *New York Times*, in a letter to

(continued on page 2)



—John Bertini

At Amtrak's Houston station, 298 board Amtrak special to San Antonio (above). Soon afterwards, 440 took a Trinity Railway Express special to Dallas (left). Amtrak kept its Dallas station open for TRE's early-morning arrival. NARP member Dr. John Bertini helped coordinate loading of both Houston trains. In Dallas, NARP Board Member Peter LeCody helped arriving passengers get to shelter at the ReUnion Center.

S. 1516, Bipartisan Rail Passenger Authorization, Could Pass This Year

The Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2005 (August *News*, lead story) may yet be enacted, or at least pass the Senate, this year. Due to the hurricanes, Congress may be in session through Nov. 18, making floor time for the rail passenger bill a possibility.

Senators need to hear support both for S. 1516 itself and also for the companion provisions, which provide the funding essential to the state capital grant program that is a vital part of the bill. Sen. Trent Lott (R-MS), who chairs the Surface Transportation Subcommittee of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, filed those provisions as Senate Amendment 1627 at the same time as S.1516 was filed. They provide for rail infrastructure bonds, and so must go

through the Senate Finance Committee.

Thus, all senators should hear support both for S.1516 and for SA 1627.

As an authorization bill, S. 1516 is the logical bill to deal with Amtrak on-board services issues, and in fact does deal with those issues, requiring Amtrak "to develop and implement a plan to improve on-board service pursuant to the metrics and standards for such service" whose development the bill also mandates. Amtrak further is required to report to the House and Senate authorizing committees about the on-board service improvements set forth in the plan "and the timeline for implementing such improvements." Additionally, generally improvement plans are required for long distance trains. As part of these plans, Amtrak must con-

sider changes and improvements to food service and other amenities.

[NARP believes on-board food service/sleeping car language in the appropriations bill is unworkable and could threaten Amtrak's existence. The Appropriations bill is likely to be considered by the Senate the week of October 17.]

In addition, House members should hear support for early action to pass a counterpart to S.1516. House Railroads Subcommittee Chairman Steve LaTourette (R-OH), who led the floor fight on Amtrak appropriations, is developing such a measure, although it could be quite different from S. 1516. It presumably would supplant the "placeholder" \$2 billion a year authorization the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee passed earlier this year. ■

NEC Infrastructure Subsidiary in Amtrak

Amtrak's Board directed management, by the January board meeting, "to take all appropriate action to create" a wholly-owned "NEC Subsidiary" to take title to Amtrak-owned Northeast Corridor infrastructure.

Actual creation of the subsidiary is "subject to final review and approval by the Board."

The Board's Sept. 22 resolution was reported in the Oct. 12 *New York Times*. This directive—like the approved budget (see fares, p. 3)—appears to conflict with the plan Amtrak's board issued in April, which said "the costs, complexities and risks of such a split within Amtrak outweigh the benefits."

The extensive work the board ordered would be needed for the Bush Administration's proposed Amtrak break-up. But the *Times* said that, "in a telephone interview...[Amtrak Chairman David] Laney denied that the vote to make the corridor a separate ...division was a precursor to separating it from Amtrak entirely."

Railroads Subcommittee Chairman Steven LaTourette (R-OH) "withheld judgment but said Congress would have lots of questions" (Reuters, Oct. 13). Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and other legislators were harshly critical.

Rita

(from page 1)

the editor from NARP's Ross Capon.

Houston Metro buses searched transit-dependent neighborhoods for people who needed the train and brought them to Amtrak's Houston station.

John Bertini, a physician and NARP member who helped load both trains, said many passengers were confined to wheel chairs; some also had oxygen tanks. He told NARP, "many passengers complemented the cool spacious cars," adding his own view as a physician that the "roominess, comfort and relative speed the trains afforded these folks makes rail an ideal means to evacuate."

As for regular service, although Amtrak trains have not served Houston since

Rail Projects in Highway/Transit Reauthorization

"SAFETEA-LU" (Safe Transportation Equity Act - A Legacy for Users) is the five-year, \$286 billion highway-transit reauthorization, enacted August 10.

For the most part, railroaders watch with admiration as other modes get "guaranteed funding," that is, money not dependent on the annual appropriations process. However, most of the following is "real" SAFETEA-LU funding for rail.

- \$100 million towards the \$1.5 billion "CREATE" project to modernize Chicago-area railroad infrastructure (July, 2003, *News*, p. 2). CREATE is one of just 25 "projects of national and regional significance" in SAFETEA-LU.

- Some of the 24 other projects are rail-related. Alameda East in southern California gets \$12.4 million. Lesser amounts go to New York City's Cross Harbor Freight Movement project; creat-

In the aftermath of these hurricanes, public officials need to consider relying more heavily on passenger rail for evacuations. Realizing rail's potential means developing plans so that railroad and public officials don't have to ad lib every decision, and so that available equipment can handle as many passengers as possible. It also means improving communications between railroads and public officials, and developing satisfactory liability arrangements. Finally, the U.S. needs a usable, standby fleet of cars. Until about 1970, a large, reserve fleet of older intercity passenger cars was available for use during holiday peak loads, and for emergencies. Such a fleet no longer exists, although the growing commuter rail fleet is a plus.

—NARP News Release, Sept. 25

Katrina, Amtrak's Galveston-Houston-Longview Thruway Motorcoach connection used an extra bus in the days before Rita to transport Gulf residents to Longview to board the *Texas Eagle*. On its last trip, the bus was caught in those record traffic jams, so passengers were put up in Longview for the night, to travel on the next day's *Eagle*.

NARP got word out about the impressive railroad effort in a September 27 re-

ing double-stack clearance in tunnels on the I-81 "Heartland Corridor" along Norfolk Southern's Shenandoah Valley line; and Sacramento Intermodal Terminal improvements.

- The section 130 highway/railroad grade crossing improvement program gets \$220 million a year (up 42% from \$155 million, the level since 1978). Beyond those funds specifically earmarked for crossings, there are additional federal funds which a state can choose to devote to this purpose.

- Two surface transportation commissions are authorized—one with 12 members to study future revenue sources for the Highway Trust Fund as well as future needs and conditions; the other with 15 members to study revenues exclusively.

The work of these commissions could greatly influence transportation policy in future years, making it important that good people are picked. Membership is likely to be controlled by the transportation committees and tax committees, respectively. The two commissions get a total of \$1.4 million a year for two years.

The law improves the Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing program (federal loans for railroads) by eliminating some onerous loan conditions, and authorizes \$35 billion in loans.

The law lets the States of Maine and Oregon continue to use CMAQ (Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality) funds for operating costs of their state-supported Amtrak services through fiscal 2009.

Other rail funding authorized but dependent on appropriations includes:

- High Speed Rail Corridor Development ("Swift Act") increased to \$100 million per year; and
- Capital Grants for rail line relocation projects: \$350 million per year. ■

Reminder: There will be separate October and November issues of NARP News since we combined March-April.

lease which included this: "Given the limited availability of passenger rail in Texas, the fact that so many people could take the train gives a tantalizing suggestion about rail evacuation possibilities where intercity passenger and commuter rail systems are well developed, and where rail systems of any size are integrated into evacuation planning." ■

U.S. Conservation For Real?

"We can all pitch in by using—by being better conservers of energy. I mean, people just need to recognize that the storms have caused disruption and that if they're able to maybe not drive when they—on a trip that's not essential, that would be helpful...If it makes sense for the citizen out there to curtail nonessential travel, it darn sure makes sense for federal employees. We can encourage employees to carpool or use mass transit...There's ways for the federal government to lead when it comes to conservation."

—President Bush, Sept. 26
White House news release

Just maybe, the U.S. now is moving towards responsible, energy-conserving transportation in the permanent manner some had hoped for in 1979.

"Mr. Bush wants all federal agencies to report back within 30 days on the [energy conservation] actions they have taken. 'It is important that the federal government lead by example,' he said in his memorandum" (*New York Times*, Oct. 3).

President Bush couched his call for conservation in terms of short-term issues. Still, his comments are significant, and the media increasingly is telling Americans about how tightly stretched energy supply is world-wide.

Two other trends reinforce this opti-

mism. Real estate developers are rediscovering urban cores. "The political movement is away from developing greenfields...and more towards steering development back to the urban cores. It's not just happening in D.C. It's happening everywhere," says Dan Fasulo, director of market analysis for Real Capital Analytics, a New York City real estate information firm" (*Washington Post*, Oct. 8).

Meanwhile, "sales of sport utility vehicles took a dive in September, dragging down U.S. automakers who were already expecting a consumer payback after a summer of employee-pricing discounts... Sales of the GMC Envoy and Chevrolet Tahoe fell more than 50% compared to last September...General Motors Corp. sales were down 24% overall. Its SUV and truck sales fell 30% while its car sales dropped 14%" (*Washington Post*, Oct 3). The same report cited a 55% decline in sales of Ford's large SUVs. Overall sales rose at companies with more emphasis on energy efficiency—Honda, Toyota and DaimlerChrysler were up 12%, 10% and 4%, respectively.

The American Public Transportation Association issued a Sept. 26 news release, *High Gas Prices, Emerging Technologies Spur Transit Ridership Increases*, and Amtrak ridership has been strong (Sept. *News* lead story). ■

Amtrak Fares Rise, Monthlies in Steps

Amtrak's general fare increase took effect October 4, having been postponed from September 20 so the Board of Directors could review strong protests over huge increases in Northeast monthly fares. Northeast ten-ride ticket prices will rise October 16. Amtrak held to its aggressive, original target for monthly fares, but decided to make the increase in two equal steps, Oct. 16 and Feb. 16.

The general increase is Amtrak's response to rising energy costs—Amtrak said its fuel costs rose 40% in the past year—and to a tight budget. The Board just intensified budget pressures by adopting a budget that assumes use of only \$540 million in federal funds for Fiscal 2006 operations, \$20 million below what was in the plan the board released in April, and \$30 million less than the Fiscal 2005 level.

Single-ride fares generally rose 7% on *Acela Express* and for long-distance

coach travel, and 5% on Northeast Regionals, Empire Corridor and Chicago-Detroit-Pontiac and for sleeping-car travel. *Downeaster* fares generally rose by one dollar (monthlies and 10-rides by about 10%, but other passes now are offered). Fares on other state-supported trains remain unchanged, although some increased earlier this year.

Also October 4, Amtrak implemented revenue management on Northeast trains. Exceptions: *Vermonters* for trips within Vermont, *Keystones* between Philadelphia and Harrisburg, and—for now—*Acela Express*. Amtrak will use up to four pricing levels to manage demand and encourage off-peak travel. *Regionals* previously just had peak and off-peak fares, with peak rigidly defined as 9 a.m. to 5:59 p.m. Fridays and Sundays.

Fares for some passengers actually declined, but fares are higher for those traveling during peak periods. The old

NARP At Work

NARP Executive Director Ross B. Capon and Assistant Director David R. Johnson have conducted numerous print media interviews and have appeared on such broadcast programs as Fox News, NPR's Morning Edition, PRI's Marketplace, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "Canada Now." Capon was scheduled to appear Oct. 20 on the nationally syndicated radio show *For the People*.

The Wall Street Journal published Capon's letter on July 21, responding to their negative July 7 editorial, "The Little Engine that Couldn't." Likewise *The Washington Post* published two responses to their negative May 3 editorial—from Sen. Conrad Burns (R-MT) and Capon—on May 10.

Johnson and Capon have also participated in various events. Capon addressed Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers Annual Meeting in Detroit on Sept. 17; he also spoke at the group's 2003 meeting. He was on a panel at a Capitol Hill forum on "Amtrak's Long Distance Trains" Sept. 22, and will be on an Oct. 19 panel at Railway Age magazine's annual Passenger Trains on Freight Railroads Conference in Washington.

Besides overseeing the NARP website upgrade (September *News*), Johnson was a panelist at the Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments "Rail Breakfast," on August 29. It was a meeting of local political and community leaders—many of whom had never attended a rail-related event.

off-peak Washington-New York fare was \$80, but—for travel early Friday, Oct. 21—Amtrak was charging \$63 for the 3 a.m., 5:30 and 6:30 departures. The 7:30 was \$84; the 8:05 *Vermonters* with limited capacity was \$104.

It was strong protests from NARP and public officials about the proposed, one-time, "sledgehammer" increase on Northeast Corridor Smart Passes (monthly passes) that caused postponement of

(continued on page 4)

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Hurricane Katrina service modifications—Restoration of service into New Orleans for the *Crescent* and *City of New Orleans* occurred October 9. The *Sunset Limited* may be restored by the end of October. CSX has reported that the *Sunset's* route east of New Orleans will not reopen until 2006 at the earliest due to several destroyed bridges.

Keystone schedule change—Occurred October 3, minor timing changes for final stages of trackwork.

System fare increase update—See story on page 3 for full details.

Santa Cruz Thruway suspended—Labor job action at Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District has caused suspension of agency's public transit services, including San Jose-Scotts Valley-Santa Cruz Amtrak Thruway bus. No alternate transportation is provided; Greyhound operates four buses a day between San Jose and Santa Cruz.

Montreal Thruway bus—Vermont Transit again is cancelling the Montreal-St. Albans connecting bus for Amtrak's Washington-St. Albans *Vermont*. Last bus trips Oct. 30.

Fare Increase (from page 3)

the entire fare increase. Some monthly passes were to have increased 59% or more. For example, a Philadelphia-New York monthly would have jumped \$375 from \$633 to \$1,008. Negative publicity seemed to far outweigh the financial significance of the proposal, since Amtrak says it sells about 2,000 such passes.

NARP Executive Director Ross B. Capon wrote to Amtrak Chairman David M. Laney opposing the huge, one-step approach, and suggesting that the ultimate targets be reviewed as well. Amtrak responded by maintaining the targets, but getting there in two steps. Monthlies, like all Amtrak tickets, can be purchased up to 11 months in advance, but of course those most harmed by the huge increases are least able to buy monthlies in quantity.

Amtrak sees the big increase as correcting its past practice of shielding monthlies from the higher percentage increases imposed on one-way tickets. Amtrak also claims that, relative to the cost of one-ways, even after the second increase takes effect February 16, the discount will remain greater than those offered by commuter railroads.

However, NARP notes that, on a per-mile basis, one-way fares on the Northeast Corridor are the highest in the land, and cautions that Amtrak is at risk of losing some of its most loyal riders. Rep. Michael Fitzpatrick (R-PA) and others criticized the increases, noting the irony of Amtrak sharply raising fares right after President Bush's plea for gasoline conservation (page 3). ■

box for postal statement



National Association of Railroad Passengers

NARP News

Vol. 39, No. 9

October 2005

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

George Chilson, President; **Wayne Davis**, **Arthur Poole**, **David Randall**, **Robert J. Stewart**, Vice Presidents; **Albert L. Papp, Jr.**, Secretary; **Robert W. Glover**, Treasurer;

Ross B. Capon, Executive Director; **David R. Johnson**, Assistant Director; **Douglas Kidd**, Director of Finance and Administration; **Tiffanie H. Childs**, Office Manager

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>. ©2005 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 October 14. Vol. 39, No. 7 was mailed second-class September 30.)