

RAILPASSENGERS



WEEKLY HOTLINE

Issue #1,392–April 25, 2025



Take Action

Association News

Amtrak's Mardi Gras To Start This Summer

[By Jim Mathews / President & CEO](#)

It's really happening – this summer Amtrak will begin to run trains again in the U.S. Gulf Coast, at least between New Orleans and Mobile, Ala., nearly two decades after Hurricane Katrina wiped out much of the track and led to “suspension” of the *Sunset Limited* east of New Orleans.

The railroad officially announced the train's name, the *Mardi Gras*, [in a release yesterday](#) introducing the new twice-daily service, even though that name leaked out more than a year ago.

Each end will get an early morning departure and a late afternoon departure, although exact schedules aren't yet finalized and passengers can't yet book travel – Amtrak is still working hard to make sure they have the equipment they need to start running trains before the open up the reservation system, and there's also the issue of being sure that the new platform in Mobile is fully finished and ready for passengers.

“*Amtrak Mardi Gras Service* is a natural choice for the name of the new trains that will reflect the region's distinctive culture,” Amtrak President Roger Harris said in a prepared statement yesterday. “Travel should be about more than just getting somewhere. Our goal is to have some of that festive Mardi Gras feeling on every trip, sharing the culture of the Gulf Coast region while connecting with the rest of the Amtrak network.”

[New Orleans, Bay Saint Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi, Pascagoula, and Mobile will get same-day connections in both directions](#) every day to the *City of New Orleans* between New Orleans and Chicago via Memphis. Passengers will also be able to make next-day connections in New Orleans to the *Crescent* to and from New York via Atlanta, and of course the *Sunset Limited* to Los Angeles via Houston, San Antonio, and Tucson.

[\[Click here for more from Jim on the new service\]](#)

Immigration, DEI Issues, Threaten Billions In Grants

[By Jim Mathews / President & CEO](#)

U.S. DOT Secretary Sean Duffy [warned Federal grant recipients this week](#) that they risk losing funding if they don't cooperate with new priorities aimed at immigration enforcement and erasing diversity-equity-inclusion (DEI), a warning which could set the stage to yank billions of dollars in funding for important rail projects in at least eight states.

California, New York, Illinois, Connecticut, and Massachusetts – together, recipients of more than \$10 billion in rail and transit grants – each have laws, court rulings, or administration policies limiting cooperation with Federal immigration enforcement efforts.

About ten years ago, North Carolina barred local entities from hindering Federal immigration enforcement, although some individual communities in

the state unofficially limit cooperation anyway. Between existing rail grants and seven proposed Corridor ID development efforts, that state has some \$450 million on the line.

Similarly and ironically, despite a statewide mandate in Louisiana to cooperate with Federal immigration enforcement, New Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office has been operating under a Federal consent decree for the past 12 years restricting compliance with "ICE detainees."

These are written requests from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE for short, that ask a local jail or law enforcement agency to hold on to an individual for additional 48 hours beyond their release date and time while ICE decides whether to take that person into custody to put them into the Federal deportation system. The consent decree bars New Orleans from complying with these detainees unless the detained person is charged with specific serious crimes. The New Orleans-Baton Rouge Passenger Rail effort entered into the Corridor ID program in 2023, with a \$500,000 Phase 1 grant.

And in Florida, where the state has had extremely strict anti-sanctuary laws on the books since 2019 and where two significant FRA Fed-State Partnership grants are pending to help build Brightline's planned Cocoa and Stuart stations, local communities have at times pushed back against the state. Fort Meyers' City Council, for example, turned down an agreement with ICE. That rejection provoked [a quick rebuke from Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier](#).

[\[For more, please click here to go to our website\]](#)

Rail Passengers Association Endorses Marc Molinaro as Federal Transit Administration Chief

Rail Passengers Association President & CEO Jim Mathews issued the [following statement](#) :

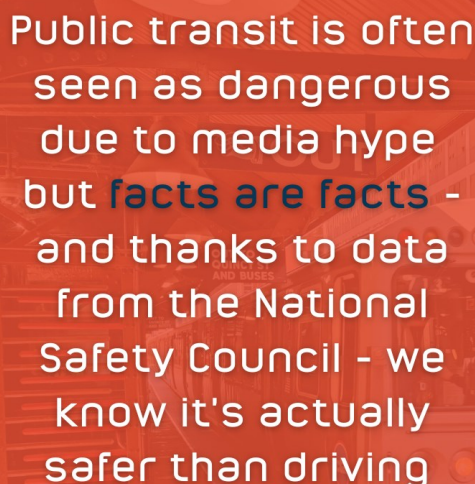
"On behalf of our 127,000 members, donors, and supporters, and the 40 million rail passengers in the U.S., Rail Passengers Association is supporting the nomination of former U.S. Representative Marc Molinaro to be Administrator of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA).

"During his time in Congress, Mr. Molinaro provided important leadership on passenger rail and transit issues that affected the services our members depend on, defending important public transportation services during critical budget votes. Mr. Molinaro's experience as a county executive in New York State and Member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure will serve him well as our nation looks to address the many challenges facing U.S. transit systems and reassert our role as a global leader in safe and efficient transportation infrastructure.

"The FTA Administrator will likely be charged with implementing the next Surface Transportation Authorization Act, currently in the preliminary phase of stakeholder outreach. Rail Passengers Association looks forward to working with Mr. Molinaro to ensure that rail and transit plays a central role moving Americans moving safely and efficiently and supporting a robust economy.

"Rail Passengers Association is pleased to offer our enthusiastic endorsement of Mr. Molinaro as the next Administrator of the FTA, and urge his swift confirmation."

Field Notes



Public transit is often seen as dangerous due to media hype but **facts are facts** - and thanks to data from the National Safety Council - we know it's actually safer than driving

HINT HINT – TRAINS ARE 17X SAFER



RAILPASSENGERS
ASSOCIATION

For more: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-public-transit-really-safer-than-driving/>

Philadelphia Region's SEPTA is "First" Commuter Rail to Offer Contactless Payment in Growing Transit Trend

By Philip Mayer, Association Volunteer

As of April 4, 2025, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) offers contactless payment on its regional commuter trains. SEPTA has accepted contactless payment on metro and bus systems since September 2023, as have many other transit systems. "With this expansion to Regional Rail, SEPTA is the first commuter-rail network in the country to accept contactless payments," said SEPTA Chair Kenneth Lawrence Jr.

Passengers can tap on and tap off using their credit or debit card or digital wallets (Apple Pay, Google Pay, or Samsung Pay), at fare gates and platform validators. Once onboard, passengers can verify their payment by showing a conductor their method of payment or by purchasing a Quick Trip onboard with contactless payment.

Passengers traveling to and from New Jersey do not have a contactless option at this time, but SEPTA will soon offer this service.

This system is called an open loop system, where passengers can use their personal credit or debit cards or their digital wallets to pay their fares. These are rapidly phasing out closed loop systems where passengers pay in a similar way but with the transit agency's app or branded fare card.

The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) accepts open loop payment as well as their Ventra cards. Utah Transit Authority (UTA) accepts open loop payments as well as their UTA cards.

The Washington, DC, area's Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority (WMATA) seeks to roll out contactless payment this year. New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) already offers contactless payment on their bus and subway systems, and plans on offering the payment option on the commuter railroads, Long Island Railroad (LIRR) and Metro North Railroad (MNR) later in 2025. Riders can currently purchase LIRR And MNR tickets on an app.

It is unclear how SEPTA can claim to be the nation's first contactless pay on commuter rail, which is often used interchangeably with regional rail. The Dallas area's Trinity Railway Express (TRE) and the Portland, Oregon, area's Westside Express Service (WES), offer contactless pay. Those western rail systems do carry far fewer passengers to fewer stations at lower frequencies. Contactless Payments are often less feasible for regional railroads as they often rely on monthly passes, which are often not conducive to contactless payment. Also, regional rail often crosses multiple jurisdictions, which can complicate this payment method.

Contactless payment is a convenient payment method whose time has come. Having the option to pay for fares in this manner will attract more people to riding trains and will make train stations more streamlined and efficient.

Traditional forms of payment should still be available for the unbanked and people who are uncomfortable or uninterested in this type of payment. Unbanked people can still access contactless payment through the use of prepaid credit and debit cards.

Urgent Call to Action for Texas Rail Passengers!

[Heartland Flyer passenger train through Fort Worth at risk if Texas doesn't allocate funding, Fort Worth Report](#)

The future of the Heartland Flyer, a crucial passenger train connecting Fort Worth and Oklahoma City, is at risk! Recent budget cuts have left Texas's funding share of approximately \$2.6 million annually in jeopardy. With ridership soaring by over 14% in 2024, totaling 123,584 passengers, this service is more vital than ever.

Local officials are rallying for the restoration of funding, emphasizing that the Heartland Flyer not only supports college students and tourists but also injects an estimated \$18 million into our local economy each year.

As negotiations over the state budget continue, we need your voice!

What can you do?

[Use this link](#) to find our local representatives and contact their office to express your support for the Heartland Flyer.

Please email [Joe Aiello](#) if you have any local, state or regional stories/projects that you would like to see get highlighted in the Hotline.

Hotline Links

A curated selection of passenger rail and transportation stories from this week. Check out our social media feeds on [Twitter](#) & [Facebook](#) to read breaking news and join the conversation!

- [Doors Closing](#), **Chicago Magazine**

The 2nd oldest and 3rd largest public transit system in the country finds itself in a massive post-pandemic funding hole, and this insightful long form piece from Chicago Magazine highlights the struggles and potential solutions for the historic L train.

- [Introducing Amtrak Mardi Gras Service twice daily between New Orleans and Mobile via Coastal Mississippi](#), **Amtrak Media**

Gulf Coast service officially has a name

- [Moving rails in Salt Lake underground is costly. Will new benefits report change the debate?](#), **KSL.com**

Members of the Salt Lake City resident-led Rio Grande Plan held a press event yesterday to unveil the results of their economic benefit analysis. The report shows a nearly 4:1 return on investment for a project that calls for the current rail corridor to be moved underground.

- [As Trump Targets DEI, Transportation Law Requires Him To Put It First](#), **Streetsblog USA**

"DEI" doesn't automatically mean "hiring practices" and, in transportation, it means emphasizing the importance of prioritizing the accessibility of underserved communities - as stated in legislation such as the IIJA and programs like the FRA's Long Distance Service Study.

- [Proposed SEPTA Cuts Are Devastating for Bucks County Workers and College Students](#), **Bucks County Beacon**

The residents who are hit the hardest by proposed service cuts by transportation agencies, are those who do not have any other option, and it becomes harder for them to get to work, or school, or to appointments. It also makes it harder for people to spend money in their communities and hurts the overall local economy.

- [Bay Area Transit agencies report ridership increases in the first quarter of 2025](#), **Mass Transit**

Six different agencies operating out of the Bay Area in California have all seen a double-digit year-to-date bump in ridership so far in 2025.

- [Trails and Rails program adds Adirondack and Cardinal for 2025](#), **Trains**

NPS' Trails & Rails program celebrates its 25th year by adding some new segments for 2025 season.

- [Amtrak advances critical improvements and repairs at two historic stations](#), **Mass Transit**

Last week, we covered the work being done at the historic Latrobe (PA) station that is served daily by the Pennsylvanian - but that is not the only needed upgrades happening along the route.

- [Celebrate Redmond's 2 New Light Rail Stations Next Month](#), **425business.com**

Saturday, May 10th is going to be a big day for transit riders and advocates in the city of Redmond, WA

- [Steamboat City Council approves resolution to explore Mountain](#)

After hearing updates from the Colorado Department of Transportation on the potential Mountain Rail service between Denver and Craig, the Steamboat Spring City Council moved to pass a resolution of support and commitments for future station planning.



[WE ARE NOW ON BLUE SKY!](#)

If you aren't following Rail Passengers on social media, you should be! We are covering all the breaking news America's passengers need to stay informed on local, regional, and national issues.

Upcoming Events

JOIN ME
at **GBT A Sustainability Summit**
on June 10 in Washington, D.C.!

FEATURED SESSION
HOW TO: Integrate Rail
into Your Corporate Travel Program
See you there?

GBT A 2025 | Sustainability Summit
Washington DC, June 10

Jim Mathews
President & CEO
Rail Passengers Association

At this year's [GBT A | Global Business Travel Association](#) Sustainability Summit, we're taking a broader approach—moving beyond carbon-focused discussions to include crucial social and environmental considerations.

Join us on June 10 in Washington, D.C. to collaborate, learn, and take action toward a more sustainable and responsible travel industry. Let's make the industry resilient together, and use my code **SPEAKER75** to get a \$75 discount before April 30th! [CLICK HERE](#)

Please contact Joe Aiello (jaiello@narprail.org) to have a local, state or regional meeting added to the Rail Passengers calendar (print and on-line) of upcoming events!

Staff Updates

Your staff is at the table, in the field, having the conversations that make a difference for passengers across the country. Learn what they're up to each week and how you can support your Association's key missions!

- **Jim Mathews, President & CEO**, worked closely alongside Sean Jeans-Gail as your Association put the finishing touches on its written submissions to the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee. He also did several press interviews this week, including one with ESPN looking ahead to how rail-savvy international visitors coming to the U.S. for next year's soccer (really, "football") World Cup will navigate a U.S. rail network that's...well, that's not what they're used to.
- **Sean Jeans-Gail, Vice President of Policy**, spent the week working with rail industry and stakeholder allied organizations finalizing proposals for the rail title of the Surface Transportation Reauthorization. The House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee will officially kick off the process next week. He also spoke with several reporters to try to understand what recent announcements from President Trump's Transportation Department means for passenger rail in the U.S.
- **Jonsie Stone, Chief of Staff**, spent the week closing March financials and preparing for the FY2024 audit. She also processed membership dues and donations sent to the DC office, assisted donors and members with questions, and tended to the operational and administrative needs of the Association.
- **Joe Aiello, Director of Community Engagement & Organizing**, continued his data work for a county-level ridership proposal and worked with members of our Council on appropriations submissions with their Congressional offices.
- **Kimberly Notarianni, Membership Management Consultant**, has

been instrumental this week in processing memberships, updating constituent accounts, adding sub-memberships for qualifying accounts, and fulfilling requests for membership cards. As a reminder, our organization no longer issues physical plastic membership cards—a change we implemented during the COVID pandemic to reduce costs. However, we're happy to provide a digital copy by email upon request for your convenience.

- **Lili Leonard, Development Assistant**, continued her work on corporate sponsor materials and a potential partnership with a national membership association.

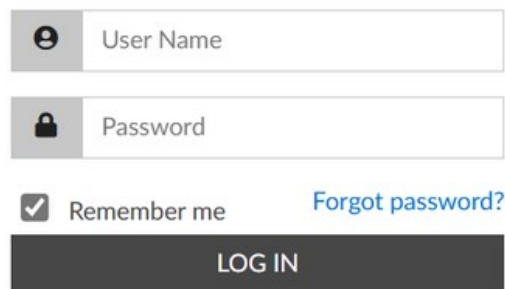
Starting **Wednesday, February 19th**, all membership, donation, and event registration transactions are being processed through **CharityEngine**. **Neon** is no longer the Association's CRM of record.

If you have the **Neon User Center** bookmarked, please update it to: <https://membership.railpassengers.org/usercenter>.

Your **Neon username and Account ID** have already been transferred to CharityEngine. However, because your **password was unique to Neon**, you will need to reset it when logging in for the first time.

Below is a screenshot of the **CharityEngine Constituent Portal** for reference.

Log in



Over the coming weeks and months, we will continue to enhance the system. If you have any questions or need assistance, please [email Kimberly A. Notarianni](#)

As with any upgrade, there may be minor hiccups. Your Association staff is here to help and if necessary, work with CharityEngine to gain the answers. We are excited by the full complement of options and benefits that will be available to our supporters through one system.

Thank you for your patience and cooperation.

New Dashboard Update in Your Constituent Portal!

When you access your constituent portal this week, you'll notice an exciting update to your **dashboard**!

We've added **new buttons** to make navigating your membership tools even easier:

Welcome To Your Membership Dashboard



Please note that some of the links are still under construction as we continue transitioning to our new software platform, **CharityEngine**.

Membership Renewals:

If you receive a renewal email, you can now access your renewal form directly through your dashboard or by clicking the link in the email.

Important Note for RENEWAL on Membership Display

The steps you take to **renew your membership** now mimic the "join" process. Don't be alarmed—your historical membership data from NEON has been successfully transferred to **CharityEngine**. The current renewal process is designed to help you **verify your contact information, Amtrak Guest Rewards preference, and communication settings**.

☐ If your NEON membership was set to **auto-renew**, your membership will continue to auto-renew in CharityEngine as well. We encourage all members to **log in and review your account** to ensure everything looks correct.

You will be issued a **new RPA member number** through CharityEngine, but your original number is still valid. You're welcome to use **either number** when purchasing Amtrak tickets.

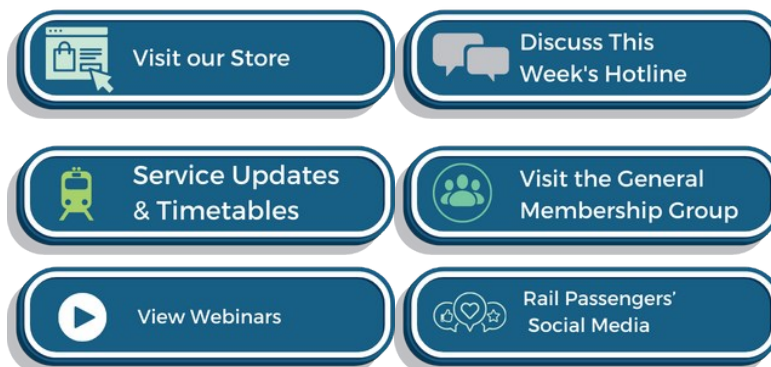
About Your New Member Number:

Your new membership number will contain **seven digits**.

☐ **Only use the first SIX digits** if you're using your new CharityEngine number when prompted during an Amtrak ticket purchase. Amtrak hasn't updated their system yet to recognize the full 7-digit number.

Thank you for your patience as we continue working to enhance your member experience. We're committed to making the new portal smooth, intuitive, and reliable!

We Have Merch!



Rail Passengers Timetables

Thanks to a collaborative effort between Rail Passengers NYS Council Member Nathanael Nerode & juckins.net's Chris Juckins, we have been able to completely update our timetables resource page.

[CLICK HERE](#)

Donate Online with Confidence

You can donate to the Rail Passengers Association online with confidence, knowing your credit card information is secure. Charity Engine uses industry-standard SSL technology to keep your information secure. Don't wait for a paper appeal to donate, support the Association today by donating here. When the web browser shows a lock next to the URL, it means that it's an HTTPS, and it's secure:

You Will Make a Difference

The Rail Passengers Association is the only organization that acts as a voice for train passengers - Amtrak, commuter rail, and rail transit riders - on Capitol Hill, before the US Department of Transportation, and before Amtrak management.

**Please note use of this form will result in a donation. If you wish to renew your membership, please go through the member center (you will need to log in) or call us at (202) 408-8362.*

GIFT



Do more with your donations. If you have questions about employer match, gifting a membership, or other questions about how to make a bigger impact, let us know! Your staff is here to help with:

- Online Donations
- Donor Advised Funds
- Employer Match
- RPA Signature Visa Card
- Gift of Membership
- and More!

With multiple secure, protected methods of payment, you have more flexibility in the way dues are paid. Skip the hassle and [contact us](#) today for help setting up automatic or online payments.

- Setup ACH or E-Check with your bank of choice
- Use a Debit or Credit Card to pay online, or
- Send a check to 1200 G Street NW Suite 520 Washington, DC 20005

Use Your Donor Advised Fund (DAF) to Donate, Renew or Join Online

You can now donate or join/renew your membership, online, through your donor advised fund using DAFpay. All Rail Passengers forms now include a "Donor Advised Fund" button under Payment.

Donation Form:

Phone Number (not required)

Phone Number

Email Address

*Email Address

☐ Yes, I would like to receive email communications.

PAYMENT

☐ Dedicate this donation?

Membership Form:

☐ Rail Passengers' Webinar Series


☐ Other


☐ Yes, I prefer communication by email rather than by mail.

PAYMENT

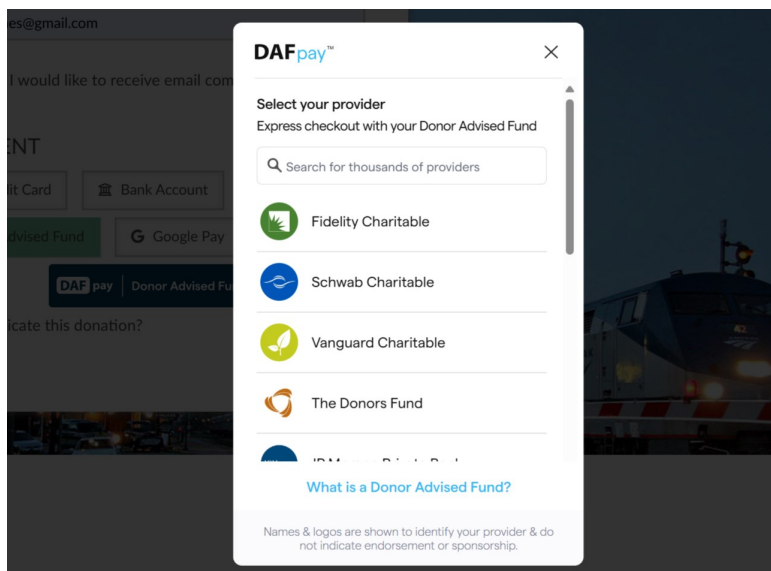
CAPTCHA

☐ I'm not a robot





After selecting Donor Advised Fund as your payment preference, you will be taken to a DAFpay screen to select your donor advised fund provider, ie., Fidelity Charitable, Vanguard Charitable, Daffy, etc.



Select your provider, then follow their prompts. If you need to provide information on Rail Passengers Association, please use the below:

National Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc.
dba Rail Passengers Association
1200 G Street, NW
Suite 520
Washington, DC 20005
Contact: Jonsie Stone, jstone@narprail.org
Tax ID: 36-2615221

Member & Donor Notices

- **The Rail Passengers Association is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. Our federal tax identification number is 36-2615221**
- **To help facilitate dissemination of electronic thank you receipts,** please make sure your contact information, **specifically your email address**, is up-to-date in your Neon profile.
- **If you need assistance with your membership**, please call the Office at 202-408-8362.
- **While our staff continues to work remotely, we are unable to provide permanent membership cards.** You can print a temporary membership card by creating an account at www.railpassengers.org (select "My Account" on the homepage).
- **Complete all information!** -- Before sealing your envelope, PLEASE double-check the credit card information on the buck slip!
 - ◊ Print credit card information clearly.
 - ◊ **Include an expiration date, month and year, as well as the CVV number.**
 - ◊ Without **COMPLETE** information, your membership renewal or donation can't be processed.
- **If you have your financial institution send a check on your behalf,** without a buckslip, PLEASE instruct them to add:
 - ◊ a notation in the memo field if the payment is for membership dues or a donation, AND,
 - ◊ your Rail Passengers Association member ID. If we have multiple members with the same name, i.e., John Smith, it can be hard to identify the correct member to attribute the payment, without the member ID.



Rail Passengers Association members have access to a full service, nationwide federal credit union with extensive product and service offerings. Signature FCU is the exclusive provider of the [Rail Passengers Association-branded Visa credit card](#) with our logo, which supports our work by giving back to our organization, and gives you 1 point for every \$1 you spend to redeem for travel and merchandise. The card has no annual fee, no balance transfer fees, no foreign transaction fees, and has a very low interest rate.

Charity Navigator

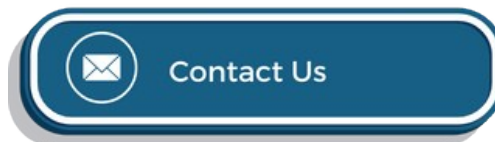


✦ FOUR-STAR ✦

Rail Passengers Association Earns Coveted 4-Star Rating from Charity Navigator

Rail Passengers Association's strong financial health and commitment to accountability and transparency have earned it a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, America's largest independent charity evaluator. Our Charity Navigator profile can be found by clicking [here](#).

If you have questions, feedback, or submissions for next week's hotline, send us your thoughts! Help us spread the word about your local, regional, and national passenger rail wins.



THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS:



RAIL PASSENGERS

EST. 1967

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