

Statement of

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Before the

Subcommittee on Railroads

The Honorable Corinne Brown, Chair

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, U.S. House of Representatives

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Field Hearing at Pittsburgh:
“Expanding Passenger Rail Service”

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Thank you very much for holding this hearing, and for the opportunity to testify. The National Association of Railroad Passengers has worked since 1967 for more and better passenger trains in the U.S. The Association is the largest citizen-based advocacy organization for train and rail transit passengers. Our mission: “A modern, customer-focused national passenger train network that provides a travel choice Americans want.”

I was raised in Pittsburgh and have lived here most of my life. I have been fortunate enough to have opportunity to travel, so I am familiar with the travel choices available to us here in western Pennsylvania and the options available in other places.

For 180 years, the Pittsburgh region has been blessed to be part of major land routes to move people and goods quickly and safely to and from the nation's east coast ports and the heart of the nation. One consequence has been that western Pennsylvania had access to inexpensive and reliable transportation, making it an attractive area for businesses and families. Unfortunately, transportation options are narrowing for the region. We still have the Pennsylvania turnpike providing good access to Philadelphia in the east and Cleveland and Chicago in the west for travel by car, bus or truck. However, airline service at Pittsburgh is much more limited than it was ten years ago. The Greater Pittsburgh airport is no longer a hub and direct service is available to only a few cities. Even Harrisburg no longer has any direct service from Pittsburgh.

Western Pennsylvania also is underserved by passenger trains, both in comparison to the heyday of passenger rail, but also to what was available fifteen years ago. Just two routes serve western

Pennsylvania, each with a single daily round-trip: the Washington-Chicago *Capitol Limited* with stops at Pittsburgh and Connellsville and the New York-Pittsburgh *Pennsylvanian* along the historic Pennsylvania Railroad with stops at Lewistown, Huntingdon, Tyrone, Altoona, Johnstown, Latrobe, Greensburg and Pittsburgh.

The inadequacy of service in western Pennsylvania is apparent not just to Pennsylvanians but would be highlighted in any nationwide analysis of Amtrak. Twice within the past 15 years, Amtrak has cut Harrisburg-Pittsburgh service frequency from two round-trips to one. When Amtrak announced its major round of service cuts in 1996 (the first time Pittsburgh-New York service ever went down to once a day), Don Phillips, then with *The Washington Post* and perhaps the nation's leading rail and aviation reporter, expressed astonishment at de facto elimination of through service along the route of the *Broadway Limited*. NARP members well beyond Pennsylvania shared this view.

Although David Gunn has received much well-earned praise for his overall effort to restore Amtrak's credibility and the condition of its infrastructure and rolling stock, we strongly disagreed with his decision—taken in response to frustration over the express freight initiative—to completely exit the mail business as well, a business that had always been profitable for Amtrak. We have periodically urged Amtrak to restore that source of revenue, important because of its direct association with train operations and the ability to expand them.

The “kill-mail” decision was the basis on which Amtrak justified the 2005 service reduction, which eliminated schedule choice in western Pennsylvania and ended through service between Chicago and all Pennsylvania points except Pittsburgh. Travelers going by train between most Pennsylvania stations and all points west of Pittsburgh must endure a layover in Pittsburgh at times when options for diversion are not the best. The layover is about four hours westbound but can be longer if the connecting train is late. Eastbound, the scheduled layover is just over two hours except on Sunday when it is just over eight hours. Nonetheless, *Pennsylvanian* ridership in Fiscal 2008 was up 12% from the year before. For the first eight months of Fiscal 2009 (October-May), ridership was up 1% at a time when most intercity travel (including on many Amtrak short-distance trains) was down.

An obvious first step to improving western Pennsylvania service would be to restore roughly the New York-Pittsburgh-Chicago train that was dropped. The existing *Pennsylvanian* then could be rescheduled to give communities along the New York-Pittsburgh segment two attractively spaced daily departure times. This added train would be a major step forward even if—as with the service when it was dropped in 2005—the train ran without sleeping cars or sit-down meal service. This is within Amtrak's ability in terms of fleet size, if not operating grant.

To add more than a few New York-Pittsburgh frequencies would require major infrastructure improvements. Amtrak's Harrisburg-Pittsburgh route is owned by Norfolk Southern and has heavy freight traffic. A public-private partnership is needed to provide extra capacity on this line, which would allow for the operation of higher-speed passenger trains without compromising this crucial freight link. The railroad was originally built with three and four tracks, but has since been reduced to two as operators sought to cut maintenance costs. Third and fourth tracks should be rebuilt, a task made easier by the fact that the grade and roadbed is still intact. Afterwards, investment in electrification should be seriously considered, as this would allow even higher speeds, contain emissions at the power plant, and reduce fossil fuel use. I have included as an appendix to my statement a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette op ed column by Henry Posner III expanding on this.

If the train was a real option for more passengers, all travelers would benefit from the more efficient use of existing infrastructure. Air traffic gridlock would be eased, providing rippling benefits across the Eastern seaboard. More cars would be taken off the road, easing traffic slowdowns and lowering road maintenance costs. Rail passengers would enjoy a more economical, comfortable, hassle-free and scenic way to travel. Downtowns along the route would be revitalized by residential and commercial development around stations. Many jobs would be created in the process. Moreover, everybody would breathe a little easier and we would be one step closer to meeting our obligations to cut emissions of climate-altering gases.

Failure to restore frequent, attractive rail passenger service to western Pennsylvania would deny the region an opportunity to take advantage of exciting developments elsewhere. Pennsylvania has invested a significant amount of money to provide frequent, fast rail service between Harrisburg and New York. To the west, Ohio is working on a plan to provide attractive rail service to connect its major cities. Indeed, Pittsburgh-Cleveland was one of four Ohio passenger train routes approved May 21 by Ohio Rail Development Commission members for inclusion in a \$7 million Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement.

It is imperative that western Pennsylvania have rail service that allows our residents to take advantage of these developments. As we learned last summer, passenger trains have great advantages over air and automobile. If service is not improved in western Pennsylvania, the region will be at a disadvantage compared with other areas where rail passenger service is being significantly improved.

Finally, I must echo the concerns of others about the need for capacity expansion at New York's Pennsylvania Station, since New York City is a major hub and the logical terminus for additional Pittsburgh-east trains. Based on plans concluded before President Obama's "game-changing" commitment to passenger trains, New Jersey Transit is proceeding with a \$9 billion project to build two, new Hudson River tunnels *which will not go to New York's Penn Station*. Amtrak has stated that this will result in need for another tunnel—fifth under the Hudson and third to Penn Station—earlier than would otherwise have been necessary. The planning need is to get the tunnel into service by 2025. However, strong public pressure to speed that timetable could result either from a major service outage in the existing, century-old tunnels (which would paralyze all Amtrak and half of NJT train service between New York and New Jersey) or from growth in passenger traffic that exceeds current expectations.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I will do my best to answer any questions you might have.

APPENDIX

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Commentary: The Obama rail challenge -- I think we can

Sunday, May 10, 2009

By Henry Posner III

The recent announcement by the Obama administration about high-speed rail has initiated a frenzy of speculation as to what this might mean for Pittsburgh, as the proposed western end of the "Keystone Corridor." As a Pittsburgh resident active in freight and passenger railroading in both this country and Europe, I offer the following comments in order to help focus our thinking.

1. This is a major opportunity for both rail and Pennsylvania. For the first time in history we have a president focused on rail as an environmentally friendly, fuel-efficient alternative to congested highways, for both freight and passengers.
2. High-speed rail to Pittsburgh will not be maglev, and probably not even a bullet train. Funding is limited, and realistically speaking the existence of the Allegheny Mountains provides a geographic constraint not found in France, Japan, Germany and other locations where truly high-speed rail (150 mph and over) flourishes. What is realistic, however, is a more flexible definition of high-speed rail, i.e. using existing rights of way and making incremental improvements for speed and capacity. That this can be accomplished is demonstrated in Sweden, where the often-overlooked X-2000 tilt trains achieve high speeds on the existing lines by taking the curves faster.
3. There is exactly one railroad line west of Harrisburg, that of Norfolk Southern. This is a high-density freight railroad, in contrast with the Amtrak-owned high-speed passenger railroad east of Harrisburg. To the extent that the Norfolk Southern line might be used for higher speeds and increased frequency of passenger service to Pittsburgh, this could be accomplished through a public-private partnership that would not compromise the crucial role that this corridor represents for the national freight network: in most locations what was once a four-track line is now a two or three-track line, so the right of way is already there. Ironically, this would mean restoring much of the capacity that was liquidated in the era of regulation. In those days railroads were considered an obsolete, dying industry, and their downsizing was part of our national transportation policy. Investment in electrification might also be part of the mix, as the environmental benefits would be an additional benefit.
4. Because a limited number of corridors will be funded, and because the Obama initiative is specifically encouraging regions to compete with each other for funding, Pennsylvania will need to get much more serious just to catch up. For example, the Midwest has had a high-speed plan in place for years based on a Chicago hub and incremental improvements to existing corridors, thus positioning them as "shovel-ready" projects. The good news, however, is that the Keystone Corridor lies entirely within the borders of Pennsylvania, and it involves only one railroad; this makes the initiative more manageable.
5. For the above reasons, the steps needed for extension of the Keystone Corridor to Pittsburgh are, in sequential order:
 - a. Construct a vision for the corridor tempered by reality, and consider solutions such as tilt trains given that this is a mountainous, heavy freight corridor.
 - b. Focus on a public-private partnership with Norfolk Southern that would not compromise the freight business, which is part of a national network generally acknowledged as the world's best.
 - c. Get serious at the state level, keeping in mind that we are competing with other states much further along -- and that the current reality is only one Amtrak train per day between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg.

d. Focus on creating transportation, as opposed to jobs. Should the economics prove competitive, the jobs will follow as a natural and sustainable byproduct.

As Western Pennsylvanians, we should insist that our political leadership approach this as an opportunity that, if pursued with a combination of realistic expectations, economic discipline and political will, can in fact compete with other corridor initiatives.

My grandfather, James T. MacMurdo, was a signal maintainer for the Pennsylvania Railroad in Blairsville. In the time of the Depression, he was reassigned to work on extending the electrification from Philadelphia to Harrisburg, an investment that created jobs in tough times but more importantly resulted in the infrastructure that serves today as the basis for the revived Keystone Corridor east of Harrisburg.

Interestingly, the ultimate vision was electrification to Pittsburgh; fulfilling this would complete the vindication of an industry characterized as obsolete and bankrupt by the time I entered it. But this is more about the future than about history!

Henry Posner III is chairman of Railroad Development Corporation, www.rrdc.com, which invests in and operates railways worldwide. He can be perceived to be shooting himself in the foot by writing this editorial, as he also serves as chairman of the Iowa Interstate Railroad (which is part of the Midwest High Speed Rail Coalition that is competing for the same funding), and chairman of the Steel City Flyer, a business-class express bus service to Harrisburg (which will be put out of business by high-speed rail). Most recently the government of France announced a joint venture with RDC to revive its carload freight business.

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