

# Has Amtrak's Time Come?

By Neil Pierce

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Are the stars finally coming into alignment for an American passenger-rail system that's even mildly comparable to 21st century world standards?

America's train advocates are mildly optimistic. And for some good reasons. Amtrak is reporting impressive ridership gains. Oil is pushing \$100 a barrel, throwing a long shadow over affordability of travel on already congested highways. Airport delays hit an all-time high last summer. Global climate concerns are mounting.

Rail freight demands, meanwhile, are rising fast, suggesting joint improvements with passenger rail. Worries are rising about mobility gaps hindering the ability of America's "megaregions" -- the Northeast, Great Lakes, California and others -- to match the performance of competitive regions worldwide.

Also positive for Amtrak: signs of a much friendlier reception in Congress. Add to that an array of states anxious to expand rail service, especially if they can get a federal "match" comparable to the 80 percent-20 percent federal-to-state match for highways.

For years, polls have shown Americans strongly in favor of Amtrak subsidies that would build a viable national rail system. But only slowly have legislators -- federal and state -- shown an openness to system expansion. And the Bush administration has been hostile; it's even tried to zero-fund Amtrak.

So here's the irony: Amtrak is able to report it carried 25.8 million passengers in the last fiscal year -- up 1.5 million from the year before. Ticket revenue rose 11 percent. Trains on the Northeast Corridor and other popular corridors are increasingly sold out.

And no one knows, notes Rick Harnish of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, how expansive demand for Amtrak service would be if many more routes were opened, offering at least three or four trains daily for reasonable frequency. His bet is that millions of Americans would opt for the more convenient system, especially as oil soars in cost: "For 50 years we assumed we could do everything by car. It's now painfully clear that's not true."

But there's an irony: Amtrak expansion could get derailed. Why? If demand keeps rising as seems likely, Amtrak estimates it will lack sufficient cars and backup equipment by the 2010-2012 time frame. Given the multiyear lead times for equipment design and manufacture, this means the procurement process needs to begin right away.

Congress can help significantly if it moves swiftly on current bills -- the major boost being a \$1.9-billion-a-year subsidy recently voted by the Senate, and a separate Senate

Finance Committee proposal for \$900 million a year to let states issue tax-free bonds to finance new intercity passenger rail infrastructure. Critical first steps will have been taken (assuming both bills can be tracked around expected Bush vetoes).

But state initiatives are also vital. Wisconsin Transportation Secretary Frank Busalacchi heads the "States for Passenger Rail Coalition" of 30 state transportation departments appealing for an 80-20 federal-state funding split to put some real steam behind rail expansion.

Fourteen states, notes Busalacchi, already provide operating support for Amtrak corridor services -- routes responsible for virtually all of Amtrak's recent ridership gains. The "Hiawatha Service" in the Chicago-Milwaukee corridor, he boasts, has boosted ridership 48 percent, to 588,000, in the last five years, with 90 percent on-time performance.

And there have been other breakthroughs. Pennsylvania, in a 50-50 cost split with Amtrak, electrified and rehabilitated the Philadelphia-Harrisburg corridor so well it now offers 110-mile-per-hour service.

In California, a \$2 billion rail bond issue that voters approved in 1990 sparked work on three major corridors (Central Valley, San Diego-Los Angeles-Santa Barbara and Sacramento-San Jose). The bond issue, notes Ross Capon of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, was originally "rammed down the throat" of a highway-dominated Caltrans (state transportation department). "But today," Capon continued, "Caltrans is proud to boast at every opportunity about the 4 million riders yearly on the combined California corridors."

Illinois made a splash last fall by doubling the number of trains it sponsors, increasing, for example, Chicago-St. Louis runs from three to five trains daily. Cascadia service (Oregon-Washington) had 674,000 passengers last year. Maine scored a breakthrough (even when New Hampshire and Massachusetts wouldn't help it) by starting up Boston-Portland "Downeaster" service; last year it carried 362,000 passengers.

But many legislators, federal and state, remain skeptical. A longtime rail system advocacy group, the National Corridors Initiative, aims to convince more of them through a Jan. 28-29 conference on U.S. transportation competitiveness at St. Louis' Hyatt Regency Hotel (within the once-derelict, now restored historic Union Station).

The affair will be called the "Carmichael Conference on the Future of American Transportation" in honor of Gilbert Carmichael, a federal railroad commissioner under President George H.W. Bush. Carmichael is an enthusiastic rail supporter -- a reminder that rails to meet America's needs will have to be a bipartisan effort -- or likely not happen at all.