



*A bold voice for transportation workers*

## **DEFENDING AMTRAK'S NATIONAL SYSTEM**

Amtrak's National Passenger Rail Network serves an essential role in our nation's connected inter-modal transportation system. While the heavily-trafficked coastal lines garner the most headlines, it is Amtrak's long distance routes that make Amtrak a truly national network, and one that provides a unique level of connectivity to communities in 45 states over thousands of interstate miles. By connecting smaller communities and rural areas with major transportation hubs, Amtrak's long distance routes provide a lifeline to areas that have little to no other transportation options while reducing traffic congestion and spurring economic growth. Furthermore, long distance routes strengthen Amtrak's overall health by feeding passengers into regional trains, the Northeast Corridor and other major rail arteries.

Given the important role that long-distance train service plays, we are concerned by budget proposals and other efforts by the Trump Administration to scale back or defund current passenger rail service. While TTD and our unions have long defended Amtrak from miss-guided austerity-driven politicians, we now must push back against recent actions by Amtrak's own leadership that would undermine a national passenger rail network. Efforts to curtail food and beverage service, cut staffing at rural train stations and withhold support from specific long-distance routes is politically short-sided and will do nothing to placate those who simply want to privatize passenger rail. We call on Amtrak to reverse these early decisions and to work with passengers, rail workers and sympathetic legislators to fund a national passenger rail system that Americans need and deserve.

In fact, long distance service maintains high popularity with the public. Recent polling in diverse areas of the country has found that a majority of Americans not only support Amtrak, but want [more rail service](#), and are willing to pay for it. This support spans political affiliation and includes areas served exclusively by long-distance routes. Ridership numbers back this up. In FY2017, Amtrak once again achieved record ridership levels. Its fifteen long distance routes carried 4.7 million passengers, a number comparable to Amtrak's busiest service—the Northeast Corridor.

Given Amtrak's popularity, it is not surprising that attempts to eliminate long-distance routes or to cut funding during debate on an annual appropriation bill fail overwhelmingly. The Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, signed into law in 2015, included a rail title that once again codified Amtrak's role as our national passenger rail provider. The five-year bill provided a steady increase in authorized funding levels for Amtrak, and Congress specifically debated and rejected efforts to eliminate long-distance service.

With this as backdrop, it is disconcerting that Amtrak announced in April that it would be eliminating traditional dining car service on the Capitol Limited, which connects D.C. to Chicago via Cleveland and Pittsburgh, and the Lake Shore Limited, which connects New York City to Chicago. Instead of freshly made entrees prepared on the train, passengers would now be

offered limited cold boxed-lunch options for days-long trips. Not only does this decision remove an important appeal of traveling via train, Amtrak workers with decades of service providing food and beverages would either lose their jobs or be forced to relocate to other parts of the country for work.

Later that month, on the heels of the food service announcement, Amtrak announced that it planned to eliminate ticketing agents in 15 Amtrak stations across the country. Coincidentally, all of those stations service long distance trains. The role of a ticket agent is not an inconsequential one. Ticket agents wear many hats including serving as the public face of Amtrak, helping the disabled and elderly, and assisting customers who aren't acquainted with Amtrak's online services. Once again, this move only serves to dilute and undermine the long distance train service experience.

More recently, Amtrak threatened to withhold its \$3 million match commitment to a recently awarded Department of Transportation TIGER IX grant to make repairs on the Southwest Chief (SWC) route. The grant would make desperately needed repairs and upgrades to 670 miles of track that stretches into New Mexico, Colorado and Kansas. Rather than working with stakeholders, including public officials, unions, and state and local governments, to address their funding concerns and to maintain service for these communities, Amtrak has chosen instead to jeopardize the routes viability. When faced with congressional backlash, Amtrak suspended service on portions of the route and replaced it with bus service. Amtrak's mandate is to provide reliable, safe, and customer-focused passenger rail service for all communities. Rejecting federal funding and offering bus service does not meet this standard.

Congress agrees. As part of its FY2019 Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies (THUD) appropriations bill the Senate adopted a bipartisan amendment that would provide an additional \$50 million in federal funding to help Amtrak maintain service along the SWC. The bill also included report language that would encourage Amtrak to improve public outreach when changing its financial commitments to grants and making policy changes related to ticket station agents. Additional report language directs Amtrak to maintain a minimum of one ticket station agent in each state where there was one in FY2018. We applaud these actions and appreciate Congress's continued bipartisan commitment to long distance train service.

Long distance routes and the national network provide more than a scenic experience or a vacation getaway. They connect remote communities to major regions and provide a vital and affordable transportation option. Neither Amtrak nor its customers are well served when long distance routes and its services are curtailed or eliminated. These changes would result in economic loss, limited transportation options, and the further isolation of communities served by long distance routes. We can, and must, do better. TTD and its affiliated unions are committed to working with Amtrak and Congress to fulfill the vision and purpose of Amtrak to provide modern, reliable service across the country.

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