

Amtrak: Still a Three-legged Stool!

by Richard L. Beadles

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On October 15 Amtrak announced that it had reached agreement with 19 state transportation departments, and related entities, to "increase state control and funding of 28 current passenger rail routes". Virginia was one of the first to affirm its support.

The National Railroad Passenger Corporation, a/k/a Amtrak, came into existence on May 1, 1971 to: (a) relieve private railroad companies of the obligation to operate intercity rail passenger services, if such companies so elected [several did not at first], and (b) to preserve a basic national system of intercity rail passenger trains. Over the past 32 years various states have agreed to sponsor supplemental regional trains. Those arrangements have not been consistent in terms of contracts and funding. Moreover, Amtrak, on its own initiative, launched, or continued to operate, various services that have come to be considered "state" trains, e.g. those which operate 750 miles or less.

From the beginning of Amtrak, many people thought that the former Pennsylvania Railroad/New Haven lines linking Washington and New York, and NY to Boston, together known today as the Northeast Corridor ("NEC"), might be the only viable part of the "national system". Subsequent developments have proven the naysayers wrong! As one would surmise from the opening paragraph, rail passenger services are popular wherever they are provided as a transportation option. Ridership has grown impressively over the past decade, and demand has outpaced both Amtrak's ability to supply equipment, and often host railroad tolerance for longer and more frequent trains.

Thus, the three-legged Amtrak stool consists of the popular NEC, plus the current skeleton of a "national system" (14 conventional train routes, plus the Auto Train), and the so-called regional -- now "state-sponsored" -- trains. From an Amtrak October 14 news release, FY 2013 (12 months ending September 30) ridership totals were as follows:

Northeast Corridor	11.4 million passenger trips	36.1%
State Supported Trains	15.4 million passenger trips	48.7%
National LD Network	4.8 million passenger trips	5.2%
Total	31.6 million passenger trips	100.0%

While some congressional critics (usually those with no train in their district) target the so-called "long distance" trains for their most severe criticism, few such critics appear to understand that the "LD" trains rack up more train-miles and serve more cities, towns and counties than do the NEC or most "state" trains. The NEC also supports, and benefits from, operation of both "state"

and "LD" trains. So Amtrak is indeed a three-legged stool, each leg dependent upon the other. The good news about increased state support is that it positions intercity passenger rail more like other modes which enjoy complimenting federal-state policy and funding arrangements. So we shall see whether the current transportation reauthorization effort in DC strengthens the legs of the Amtrak stool, or attempts to knock one out. If you have a view, better let them know.