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Total Ridership vs. Riders per Departure
By Mike Christensen, Executive Director
Utah Rail Passengers Association

I sometimes make maps and do repetitive data entry as a way to relax. What follows is the result of me relaxing over the past couple days. Earlier this week, I stumbled upon a 2013 article on CityLab titled “Visualizing how poorly Amtrak’s route network serves most of the U.S.” The article features a map with proportionally-sized dots representing Amtrak’s total annual ridership for its 500+ stations. Unfortunately, we see long-distance routes attacked due to their relatively low ridership. However, I believe this is the wrong way to examine ridership as it gives the impression that only people in blue states ride trains in large numbers. It is a similar issue as those who try to claim that New York City is a dirty city due to its large total emissions, yet ignore that New York City has the

(RIDERSHIP continues on page 2)
(RIDERSHIP continued from page 1)

lowest emissions in the nation on a per capita basis.

Obviously, a station on the Northeast Corridor with 70+ departures per day is going to have higher total ridership than a station on a long-distance route with 2 departures per day. The deeper question is how the ridership compares on a per train basis. So, I set out to redraw the map based on riders per departure.

Step One—Recreating the annual ridership map. I downloaded a spreadsheet listing all Amtrak stations and their locations from the US DOT. I then somewhat painstakingly downloaded the 2018 ridership statistics for every station from the Rail Passengers Association and added the 2018 total ridership for each station to the spreadsheet. Then I loaded the spreadsheet into ArcGIS and generated a 2018 version of the map featured in the CityLab article.

Step Two—Create a map showing the number of departures per year from each station. Rather than spending hours looking through Amtrak schedules to determine how many times per day a train stops at each station, I queried the Amtrak Status Maps Archive Database for each station during the 2018 calendar year. The database automatically provides the total, which I added into the spreadsheet. Then I could generate a map with each station sized by the number of departures during 2018.

Step Three—Create a map showing riders per departure. This was the easiest step, since all it required was having the spreadsheet divide the total 2018 ridership by the total 2018 departures. The resulting map shows that long-distance routes perform much better when ridership is examined on a per train basis. More trains equal more ridership.

(A couple caveats about the map: The Auto Train terminals at Lorton and Sanford result in huge dots, as does the Ski Train at the Winter Park Resort. Also, the ridership data includes transfers between routes, which will make stations like Chicago larger.)

I’ll repeat the bottom line again: More trains equal more ridership. This lends support to the “more trains” portion of our push for “more trains, better trains.”

This article appeared in the June 2019 issue of All Aboard Indiana, the newsletter of the Indiana Passenger Rail Alliance.

Farewell Hoosier State

On the map above, the large red dot in the middle of Indiana is Indianapolis, where Trains #850 and #851, the Hoosier State, have carried passengers to and from Chicago and the communities of Dyer, Rensselaer, Lafayette, Crawfordsville and Indianapolis for more than three decades. Despite the efforts of the four smaller communities, who rallied to financially support the service when a 2008 change in federal policy required states to fund routes of less than 750 miles, service was suspended on June 30 of this year due to the failure of the state legislature to approve the annual $3 million appropriation to keep the train running.
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Springfield, Massachusetts Union Station Reborn

Springfield Union Station was opened by the Boston and Albany Railroad (B&A) in 1926. Shuttered by Amtrak in 1973, a massive rehabilitation project was undertaken by the Springfield Redevelopment Authority in recent years. The facility was reopened to travelers and residents alike in June of 2017 as a true intermodal center serving customers of Amtrak’s Northeast Regionals, Lake Shore, Ltd., and Vermonter trains; the CTrail Hartford Line commuter trains launched in June of 2018; the extensive regional network of the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA); and Greyhound and Peter Pan intercity bus services. A new high-level platform is almost ready for use by train passengers. Each of the services provides staffed ticket counters and there are comfortable lounges for bus and transit users. The 26-bay bus terminal is just outside the west door and a multi-level parking structure completes the complex. Click on the links above to learn about milestone events and see photos of the station. Visit the Great American Stations website to learn more about the history of the station and the city.

View from elsewhere . . .

“For well over two decades, we’ve had no big-picture guiding purpose for the federal transportation program. Like a ship with a jammed rudder heading off aimlessly into forever, federal transportation policy has been limping along without an overarching purpose or destination in mind. How does this inertia lead us toward all the wrong things?”

— "National transportation policy is a rudderless ship sailing off into oblivion", commentary by Stephen Lee Davis posted on Transportation for America. Indiana Rail Passenger Alliance colleague, Phil Streby, urges fellow advocates to get this into the hands of local media. Maybe state and federal decision makers, as well?

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