



ON TRACK

The E-Bulletin of the Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers

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Issue # 107

June 2021

The Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc. (MARP) is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit corporation established in 1973 to improve passenger train service, travel conditions for passengers, and to work for the preservation of historic rail stations.

Monthly meetings are held at locations around the state. Check the website for dates and venues. The public is invited to attend.

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2021 MEETINGS

28 January – Member Meeting
Virginia High Speed Rail

18 March – Member Meeting
Amtrak has Plans for Ohio
Zoom at 5:00 PM

15 April – Member Meeting
Toledo Passenger Rail Committee
Zoom at 5:00 PM

13 May – Join HSRail.org to hear
Derrick James Amtrak's Vision 2035

10 June – Member Meeting
Empire State Passengers
Zoom at 5:00 PM

15 July – Invitation to attend
VHSR Town Hall on-line

Fall Date TBA
48th Annual Meeting

Visit www.marp.org
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Congress on the Verge of Transformative Action

Having kicked the can down the road last fall, by failing to pass a new five-year Surface Transportation Act, both the Senate and the House now have bills in the works designed to set policy and funding levels to keep the nation's transportation system functioning for the next five years.

The **INVEST in America Act** was approved by the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee on June 10 and is set for floor debate on July 1. To the delight of advocates for a more balanced transportation system, the bill emphasizes "fix it first" for roads and allocates a larger share of the pie to alternatives: transit, trains and facilities for pedestrians and bicycles. Amtrak is authorized at \$32 billion, a three-fold increase over past levels. Transit is authorized for \$109 billion. Funding would be provided for grant programs to support, among other things, development of high-speed rail projects. (Read RPA commentary on the bill [here](#).)

On June 24, the Senate Commerce Committee approved for floor action **S.2016 Surface Transportation Investment Act of 2021**. This is the bill Derrick James spoke of at the June 10 MARP meeting (see meeting report on next page). The bill includes Amtrak's \$25 billion request that will allow the company to move forward with its "**Amtrak Connects US**" program to enhance existing services and develop new corridors throughout the country.

While these two bills are advancing under the radar, headlines have been captured in the last week by wrangling over a big infrastructure bill. Congress appears to be ready, at last, to deliver on the need for massive investment in the nation's failing infrastructure, but just how massive that investment will be is a point of contention. The President's **American Jobs Plan** envisions spending \$80 billion for passenger and freight rail projects over and above what Congress authorizes in the Surface Transportation Act. A bi-partisan group of ten Senators has put forth a **framework plan** that proposes \$579 billion in new spending, including \$66 billion for passenger and freight rail and \$49 billion for public transit.

Passenger rail advocates have reason to be cheered by a Congress that appears ready to invest more for trains and transit—a lot more—but the road to final passage is long and winding. Stay tuned!

MARP Members & Friends Are Invited

To a Virtual Town Hall Hosted by
Virginians for High Speed Rail

Hear how CSX learned to play nice
with passenger rail

See page 3 for details and RSVP

Empire State Passengers Association Reports Gains and Challenges

On June 10, forty-two MARP members and friends gathered on Zoom to hear about the accomplishments and concerns of our fellow advocates in New York State. Before launching into those matters, we heard briefly from Derrick James, Amtrak Senior Manager for Government Affairs. Mr. James spoke about Amtrak's Corridor Development Program "**Amtrak Connects US**" and the need for advocacy to gain Congressional approval of Amtrak's \$25 billion reauthorization request to allow expansion of services around the country. Under Amtrak's proposal, Michigan could see increases to 3 daily round trips on the *Pere Marquette*, 2 daily round trips on the *Blue Water*, and 6 daily round trips at 110 mph on the *Wolverine*, with one or more of the Chicago-Detroit trains extended to Toronto. The plan envisions a new corridor connecting Detroit to Toledo and over to Cleveland with 3 daily round trips. James characterizes the plans as "aggressive, but realistic." Michigan Senator Gary Peters chairs the Transportation subcommittee of the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee that, on June 16, approved more than \$25 billion for intercity passenger rail as part of **S.2016 Surface Transportation Investment Act of 2021**. Responding to an observation that MARP's proposed **Windsor Connector bus service** could serve as an interim strategy for service to Toronto, James said that Amtrak is "already working on this."

Our guest speaker, Mr. Bruce Becker, is past President of the **Empire State Passengers Association** and currently its Communications Director. Mr. Becker has served on the NARP Board of Directors and as the Vice-President of Operations for NARP 2015-2019. He is currently the Principal of Clear Block Consulting, which offers services in marketing, event planning, and rail passenger advocacy.

Becker notes that ESPA was founded in 1980, focusing on intercity passenger services outside the greater New York City area. The group, with 600 active members, is organized as a 501c4 which allows it to lobby. Until recently an all-volunteer organization, ESPA has hired Steve Strauss as a part-time executive director.

Since 2010, the *Empire Corridor* has seen a number of significant improvements to the infrastructure, among them the completion of the Rensselaer Station with the addition of a 4th boarding track and extension of the hi-level platforms. Niagara Falls, Buffalo Exchange Street, Rochester (the 9th busiest Amtrak station), Schenectady, Saratoga Springs and Syracuse all have new stations and improvements have been made at legacy stations in Rome and Utica. Rhinecliff and Hudson stations are pending. Between Albany and Schenectady, 19 miles of 2nd main have been completed.

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The CSX segment from Poughkeepsie to west of Schenectady has been transferred to Amtrak control under a long-term lease. Carry-on bike service is available. Re-introduction of Hudson Valley food Service and the re-opening of the Rensselaer commissary was approved by New York State pre-Covid. ESPA will be pushing for implementation of these plans as the health crisis subsides.

Projects ahead for New York State include: Long Island Railroad Eastside access to Grand Central (2022); the Gateway Project and Hudson River Tunnels; re-development of New York Penn Station (faces strong local opposition); Metro-North access to Penn Station via Hellgate Bridge Line (4 new stations in the Bronx, strong support); and future direct Amtrak NEC service to Long Island.

Remarking that this is all good, Becker questions whether train **service** has improved. As we do in Michigan, he laments the general lack of additional frequencies, increased capacity, reduction in trip times or greater reliability.

A major problem is the failure to complete the Empire Corridor Tier-One EIS, launched in 2010. The Draft EIS was out for public comment in 2014, but the final report is now slated for 2022. It appears that politically motivated opposition at the state level may be a factor. Another limiting factor is the lack of an up-to-date state rail plan. A 2009 agreement between the state & CSX limits top speed on the line to 90mph. ESPA has long endorsed an incremental improvement approach, with the designated 90mph maximum authorized speed (MAS) option as an achievable next step forward.

On the plus side, new *Empire Corridor* trainsets are included in the **pending Amtrak order**, but not expected to be in service before 2031-32. These will be powered with Siemens dual mode engines and configured for push/pull operation. Coaches will be similar to *Brightline* and *Amtrak Midwest* equipment.

Ethan Allen service, suspended during the pandemic, will resume on July 19. Giving a huge boost to Vermont tourism, the *Ethan Allen* is slated to begin service to Burlington in the first half of 2022.

Regarding cross-border operations, ESPA would like to see expedited clearance for *Maple Leaf* passengers in both directions at the new Niagara Falls station since it was built to accommodate this. Procedures for pre-clearance at Montreal for *Adirondack* passengers are under discussion. On-board inspections (as currently performed on the *Adirondack*) will not be allowed in the future. Transport Action Ontario's Ken Westcar, via the chat box, said there is lots of support in southwestern Ontario and Montreal for easing border crossings and that "Rumor has it that USDOT

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Secretary Buttigieg and Canadian minister Alghabra are talking about passenger rail expansion.” Also chiming in via the chat box, Derrick James conveyed that “Amtrak has no pressure points with either country's border clearance agencies” and that any change will have to come from leadership within those agencies.

Responding to frustration expressed that passengers can travel unimpeded across the border between Finland and Russia, Becker quipped, “But you’re talking about friendly nations.”

Becker sees service across southern Ontario linking New York and Michigan as not realistically possible. Ken Westcar, via the chat box, said, “Canadian advocates worked hard on *Canada Southern Railway* (CASO) preservation but it's now been re-designated as a utility corridor, hiking trail and parking lot for multiple Walmart stores on the route.

Asked about re-routing the *Lake Shore. Ltd.* through Michigan, Becker said ESPA does not support this due to the longer running time and the reduction of service to communities on the current route. However, ESPA would actively support re-instating a “*Lake Cities*” Detroit-Toledo connection as well as a new through service New York to Chicago via Detroit and the Michigan Line. ESPA could support running separate *Lake Shore* trains Chicago-Boston and Chicago-New York City, but believes CSX would not allow the added service. Becker urges MARP to join the Lake Shore Limited Coalition spearheaded by *All Aboard Ohio* to foster cooperation in order to maximize current routes and services. Becker expressed skepticism about the return of full dining service on the *Lakeshore*. (NOTE: *more recently, Amtrak has indicated it is considering returning traditional dining* to the Eastern trains.)

Becker concluded his remarks with the observation that “Amtrak has come forth with a great vision and we advocates need to be supportive” adding that if things are going to change, it’s up to the states as Amtrak’s “customers” to take the initiative.



Virginians For High Speed Rail Virtual Transportation Town Hall Series
Town Hall #2 | July 15, 2021 at 1pm (EST)

Stephen Gardner, Amtrak President & Shannon Valentine, VA Transportation Secretary

“The True Story of the Virginia-CSX Rail Deal: Lessons Learned and the Future of Passenger Rail”

Thursday, July 15 at 1pm (ET)

MARP members are cordially invited to attend this FREE Town Hall

[REGISTER HERE](#)

We hear from our readers . . .

We were taken to task by a member who took umbrage with our reporting on the COVID-stimulus bill passed by Congress in March. Yes, it is true that “*the COVID-stimulus passed with no Republican votes.*” But, yes, it is also true that there was (and is) “*strong bi-partisan support for the mandate that Amtrak resume daily long-distance train services and recall employees furloughed in response to the pandemic.*” It is important to recognize that aid for Amtrak was only a small portion of this \$1.9 trillion bill. For many members of Congress, there was more to dislike in the bill than there was to like.

Over the last several years, Amtrak has become, increasingly, a non-partisan issue, with support coming from both sides of the aisle as lawmakers recognize the societal and economic benefits of passenger trains to their communities. The Rail Passengers Association has recognized this support more than once with its *Golden Spike Award*. In 2016, the award went to South Dakota GOP Senator John Thune whose state doesn’t have **any** Amtrak service. In 2019, the award was shared by three Republicans (Senators Cory Gardner (CO), Jerry Moran (KS), Pat Roberts (KS)) and three Democrats (Senators Michael Bennet (CO), Martin Heinrich (NM), and Tom Udall (NM)) for their success in preventing Amtrak from truncating the *Southwest Chief* route with a bus bridge between Dodge City KS and Albuquerque NM.

Just two weeks ago, the 28 member Senate Commerce Committee (evenly divided by party), in a strong showing of bi-partisanship, voted 25-3 to advance S.2016 which reauthorizes funding for Amtrak at \$25 billion. The bill is co-sponsored by Senator Cantwell (D-WA) and Senator Wicker (R-MS), himself a former *Golden Spike* winner in recognition of his unflinching support of passenger trains over his many years in Congress.

View from elsewhere . . .

“Amtrak’s Corridor Vision exemplifies the kind of investments called for in President Biden’s American Jobs Plan—infrastructure investments that will spark economic recovery help address climate change and advance social equity. Our vision builds upon Amtrak’s national network of long-distance trains, integrating new and improved corridors into our existing system. It is important to note that Congress created Amtrak for this very purpose—to connect America by rail on behalf of the federal government and state partners—and the vision leverages Amtrak’s national capabilities and expertise in place to plan, build and operate these new routes.”

--Amtrak CEO Stephen Gardner, quoted in news article by Micki Wagner [Could a New Era of Train Travel Be Upon Us?](#)

“A new era of train travel?”

Indeed!

take a look at

[Amtrak Vision 2035 Fact Sheet](#)

[Amtrak Joe's plans for trains](#)



Rocky Mountaineer on the Move

Seen here on June 21 heading up the South Thompson River from Kamloops BC, with CP 8512 in the lead, fourteen cars of the famed *Rocky Mountaineer* luxury train are on their way to Denver for the inaugural season of [Rockies to the Red Rocks](#) excursions over the Colorado mountains to Moab, Utah. Rocky Mountaineer will launch the route with 40 departures across 10 weeks from August 15 to October 23, 2021. Overnight stays in Glenwood Springs mean travel will take place during daylight hours. —Photo courtesy of Russell Grycan



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