

TESTIMONY

HOUSE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE HEARING

April 10, 2013

Submitted by Kenneth Joseph on behalf of Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail

Good morning. My name is Kenneth Joseph and I am here representing Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail. First of all, let me express my gratitude on behalf of our organization for the Commonwealth's successful negotiation with Amtrak to enable the *Pennsylvanian* to continue operation. Special thanks go to the members of this Committee who were helpful in moving that negotiation along. The train is an important transportation asset to the communities it serves and its loss would have made each of those communities a less attractive place to live.

Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail is a nonprofit organization founded by several Pittsburghers who travel regularly between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg and wanted to see the service continued and improved. Since our founding, we have attracted members from other communities served by the *Pennsylvanian*. We are very pleased that the existing service will continue and we will continue to work to have improvements made to service in the Keystone West corridor.

One thing the committee should be aware of is that travel time is not the most significant factor to a lot of folks in making their travel decisions. This fact helps explain why the *Pennsylvanian* carries as many passengers as it does today, even though it travels on a right of way that was surveyed and constructed in the 1850's, long before modern earthmoving techniques were available to create gentle curves and inclines through the Allegheny mountains.

Record Amtrak ridership figures throughout the United States are evidence that many people who have other transportation options are now choosing the train. Recent surveys show that both per capita car ownership and per capita miles driven have been trending down over the past few years. Growing numbers of Americans are seeking alternatives to the private car. This is especially true of our increasing senior population and, more significantly of our younger population. Many people now regard driving as a

chore keeping them from other more pleasurable activities, such as staying connected on their personal electronic devices. These folks want alternatives, including alternatives that may involve more travel time than driving.

In the past few years, several states have made great strides in creating intercity rail service that gives a large number of its citizens an alternative to driving. Here are a few examples:

(a) Maine began its highly-regarded *Downeaster* service in December, 2001, and now offers five daily Boston-Portland round-trips with two trips recently extended to Brunswick, Maine. Although critics panned the service before it began, both because of slower-than-bus running times and physical isolation from the rest of the Amtrak system in Boston (no rail link between North and South Stations), ridership and economic impact have been tremendous – with FY 2012 ridership almost 542,000.

(b) Virginia has worked with Amtrak to extend a Northeast Corridor train along CSX and Norfolk Southern tracks from Richmond to Norfolk, the first service Norfolk-Washington service and the first passenger service on the NS line for several decades. That service began December 12, 2012. Previously, Virginia extended a daily Northeast Corridor service from Washington to Lynchburg.

(c) Over a period of several years, Washington and Oregon have worked with Amtrak to provide additional and faster service in the corridor between Seattle and Eugene through Portland. That corridor now carries more than 850,000 passengers a year, making it the busiest corridor outside of the Northeast and California, despite the fact that a trip from the Portland Amtrak Station to the Seattle Amtrak Station takes 2 hours and 45 minutes by car, while the train takes 4 hours and 20 minutes.

Section 209 of PRIIA places several states other than Pennsylvania in the position of paying for passenger rail service that Amtrak used to provide at no charge to the state. At least two of those states are viewing this situation as an opportunity to look at how the service can be improved to better serve the citizens of those states:

(i) The states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont have come together to create a “Knowledge Corridor” in the Connecticut River Valley. In this market, those states plan to increase the number of trains, increase their speed incrementally, upgrade the track, and coordinate fares.

(ii) New York State will soon release a Draft Environmental Impact Statement

that presents five options for increasing and improving its passenger rail service between Buffalo and Albany.

These states are utilizing their powers under Section 209 of PRIIA to make business decisions about passenger rail service, including the frequency of service and ticket prices, that will not only best serve their citizens, but also give the states the best return on their investment. (The amount charged to the states under PRIIA is any amount that the cost of the service, exceeds revenues, as determined according to criteria approved by the states and Amtrak.) We suggest that Pennsylvania study what has worked in other states and consider making improvements to the Keystone West service, such as adding at least one additional frequency and improving travel times. Marketing the service may also be an effective strategy to reduce the cost of the service.

In summary, we at Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail urge the Commonwealth to follow through and appropriate the funds necessary to keep the *Pennsylvanian* running, and also take a serious look at adding service so that, for example, Pittsburghers could take the train and still spend a productive day in Harrisburg or students at Juniata College could finish the day's classes before catching a train for points east of Huntingdon. As well, given the excellent connections available in Philadelphia and New York City, more frequent schedules would enable people making longer trips (where fast running offsets slower speeds west of Harrisburg) to have more choices about when to travel.

As noted earlier, the *Pennsylvanian*, in spite of its slower speeds through the Alleghenies, provides a service that appeals to many Pennsylvanians and folks from other states traveling to Pennsylvania. The Keystone West service is an important transportation asset to the communities it serves, but with a little care from the Commonwealth, it could be a much more significant one.