

Testimony

Pennsylvania House Transportation Committee Public Hearing

August 28, 2019 – Altoona Railroaders Memorial Museum

Submitted by Mark Spada on behalf of Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail

My name is Mark Spada, President of Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail (WPPR), a non-profit organization dedicated to the improvement and expansion of passenger rail service throughout western Pennsylvania. I am here to discuss the potential of enhanced passenger rail service in the Harrisburg-Pittsburgh corridor. On behalf of WPPR, thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present the following testimony.

The Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA) required states to fund the majority of operating expenses not covered by revenues for short-distance trains, trains whose routes are fewer than 750 miles, starting October 1, 2013. This includes Amtrak's Pennsylvanian which runs between New York, Harrisburg and Pittsburgh with stops at several intermediate western and central Pennsylvania communities, among them Altoona. Beginning on that date, the state commenced providing operating support to the Pennsylvanian as well as continued providing funding for the Harrisburg - Philadelphia Keystone Service trains as it had done for many years.

Much of the impetus for that decision was an outpouring of support for the Pennsylvanian received by state legislators, the governor's office and PennDOT from citizens, public officials, the business community, colleges and organizations such as WPPR. Several state legislators publicly noted the unexpected number of pro-Pennsylvanian correspondences they received from constituents. The message they and the other state officials received was universal and emphatic. In light of limited transportation alternatives, maintaining and increasing passenger rail service was vital to their communities. With an average trip length on the Pennsylvanian consistently in the 230 -235 mile range, a distance most closely equivalent to New York to Lewistown or Philadelphia to Altoona, the train is clearly just not another choice for riders between Philadelphia and Harrisburg.

For the towns served by the Pennsylvanian between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg – Greensburg, Latrobe, Johnstown, Altoona, Tyrone, Huntingdon and Lewistown - there are few, if any, other transportation choices besides the train. There are two daily buses along that route,

neither of which stop in Huntingdon. However, both do stop in State College which makes the trip time to Harrisburg from, for example, Johnstown or Altoona, longer via bus than on the train. There is no direct air service between Johnstown and Philadelphia or New York, or Altoona and Philadelphia or New York. The present air service from Pittsburgh to Johnstown or Altoona is provided by three daily 9/10-seat aircraft operating under the federal Essential Air Services program. Those three flights would fill less than one-half of a passenger rail car. Even Pittsburgh, despite its larger population, is not immune to some of these same issues. There is no direct air service between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg, or between Pittsburgh and Scranton or Allentown for that matter. Additionally, Megabus, which does not service any of the above mentioned intermediate towns, became a less desirable option for many Pittsburgh travelers when they added a stop in State College for trips to Harrisburg, thus considerably lengthening their travel time.

This lack of alternatives has resulted in the Pennsylvanian becoming an indispensable means of transportation as evidenced by consistently strong ridership numbers on the train as shown in Table 1. Verifiable numbers for the missing years were not yet found.

Pennsylvanian and Keystone Service Ridership Numbers - Table 1

Year	Keystone Trains	Trains to Pittsburgh	Total # of Trains	Keystone Riders	Average Load Factor	Pennsylvanian Riders	Average Load Factor	Total Riders
1994	8	2	10	548000		362000		910000
1995	7	2	9	636000		396000		1032000
1996	5	2	7	519000		452000		971000
2005	10	1	11	823000		184049		1007049
2006	13	1	14	988454		180140		1168594
2007	13	1	14	1183281		200999		1384280
2008	13	1	14	1215785		199484		1415269
2009	13	1	14	1296838		203392		1500230
2010	13	1	14	1342507		207422		1549929
2011	13	1	14	1420392		212006		1632398
2013	13	1	14	1466504	42.3%	218917	64.5%	1685421
2014	13	1	14	1326450	42.3%	230767	63.8%	1557217
2015	13	1	14	1359615	39.7%	231720	66.7%	1591335
2016	13	1	14	1467216	n/a	223114	67.3%	1690330
2017	13	1	14	1506000	43.6%	221000	64.6%	1727000
2018	13	1	14	1519000	44.2% (est)	214800	62.4% (est)	1733800

Note: The Three Rivers ended operation on March 7, 2005.

Note: There were two trains operating between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg in 1994 - 1996.

Sources; Amtrak year-end reports & news releases, and May 1998 GAO report, Intercity Passenger Rail

Additionally, the average load factor (ALF) percentages (basically passenger miles/seat miles or the percentage of available seats that were filled by passengers) are significant when reviewing the ridership figures. The Pennsylvanian's ALF numbers are regularly among the highest on the Amtrak system, an impressive achievement considering there is only one train per day between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg. That indicates that not only there is a strong on-going demand for service, the lack of additional trains limits the convenience and use for potential rail passengers, thus suggesting much of that demand is unmet. This is further evidenced by the significantly higher ridership numbers achieved in 1994 – 1996 when two trains were operating to Pittsburgh.

Perhaps the best illustration of the importance of more frequent service is the steadily increasing ridership numbers for the Keystone Service trains shown in Table 1. The corridor is considered to very successful based on the increasing ridership which again exceeded 1.5 million last year. The infrastructure improvements completed in 2006 along the Keystone Corridor certainly resulted in some gains in speed. However, the major reason for the Keystone line's success is the high frequency of service at 13 daily weekday trains. Ridership began to see significant gains as the number of trains increased.

Despite the continuing strong ridership numbers on the Pennsylvanian, the train's travel time between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg is sometimes raised as a point to consider when discussing possible additional service. The figures in Table 2 provide data that will help address that issue. The table consists of the average speed for many of the state –supported trains including the Pennsylvanian and the Keystone Service runs.

Pennsylvanian vs. Other State Trains Speed Comparison

Table 2

Route	City 1	City 2	Miles	Stops (not incl. origin station)	Avg. miles between stops	Hours	Minutes	MPH	Weekday Trains
Pennsylvanian	Pittsburgh	Harrisburg	249	8	31	5	23	46.25	1
Keystone	Harrisburg	Philadelphia	104	11	9	1	50	56.73	13
Keystone	Harrisburg	Philadelphia	104	4	26	1	35	65.68	13
Downeaster	Boston	Portland	116	9	13	2	30	46.40	5
Empire	New York	Albany	141	6	24	2	30	56.40	13
Empire	New York	Buffalo	437	14	31	8	0	54.63	4
Adirondack	New York	Montreal	381	19	20	10	30	36.29	1
Vermont	New Haven	St. Albans	308	19	16	7	0	44.00	1
Ethan Allen	New York	Rutland	241	11	22	5	30	43.82	1
Piedmont	Charlotte	Raleigh	173	8	22	3	10	54.63	4
VA Service	Washington	Lynchburg	173	6	29	3	46	45.93	2
VA Service	Washington	Roanoke	229	7	33	5	1	45.65	1
MI Service	Chicago	Detroit	281	11	26	5	8	54.74	3
Illini/Saluki	Chicago	Carbondale	309	10	31	5	30	56.18	3
Illinois Zephyr	Chicago	Quincy	258	9	29	4	22	59.08	2
MO River Runner	St. Louis	Kansas City	283	9	31	5	40	49.94	2
Lincoln Service	Chicago	St. Louis	284	10	28	5	30	51.64	5
Hiawatha Service	Chicago	Milwaukee	86	4	22	1	29	57.98	7
Cascades	Portland	Seattle	186	7	27	3	30	53.14	5
Pacific Surfliner	Los Angeles	San Diego	128	10	13	2	55	43.89	12
Capitol Corridor	San Jose	Sacramento	133	13	10	3	3	43.61	7
San Joaquin	Oakland	Bakersfield	315	14	23	6	14	50.53	6

Note: The times used for some trains are those between the fastest and slowest times for the given route.

The average speed of the Pennsylvanian is slightly over 46 mph between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg. That speed is in the same general area as many of the other routes. It is actually faster than the average speeds of routes considered to be successful including the Washington – Lynchburg and Washington – Roanoke runs in Virginia and the Los Angeles – San Diego and San Jose – Sacramento routes in California. Interestingly, despite a top speed of 110 mph, the Keystone trains that stop at all of the stations achieves an average speed of around 57 mph. That should not be surprising considering the train stops at 11 stations within 104 miles. With plans to each add an additional train, Virginia (Washington – Lynchburg) and North Carolina (Charlotte – Raleigh) appear to believe that increasing frequency at the given speeds is the preferred way to improve their service.

WPPR agrees and thus believes that adding an additional train(s) to serve the Pittsburgh – Harrisburg through increased frequency is the best way to increase ridership. By taking additional steps such as including more western PA locations in PA Trips By Train, a program that offers discounted rail and event tickets, as well as expanding the use of connecting Thruway buses to feed more riders into the passenger rail system, the state will help provide improved transportation choices throughout western PA. Thank you for your time and consideration.