

Pennsylvania House Transportation Committee Public Hearing Testimony - August 18, 2020
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.

WPPR's goal is to increase the number of passenger trains between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg (and points east) from the current one daily train to two trains. Our efforts to increase began in earnest in late 2012 with our advocating for the state to include Amtrak's Pittsburgh – New York (444 miles) Pennsylvanian in its operating support of Pennsylvania intercity passenger rail. 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. Beginning on that date, the state commenced providing support to the Pennsylvanian as well as continued funding the Harrisburg - Philadelphia Keystone Service trains as it had done for many years.

Since then, WPPR has advocated for increased service to western Pennsylvania through numerous presentations, public rallies, and letters of endorsement from the region's government, community and business entities, as well as previous testimony before this committee in Harrisburg, Pittsburgh and Altoona. We have provided information and data for the Pennsylvanian showing strong previous (two daily trains until 2005) and on-going ridership figures, average speeds competitive with, and in several cases faster than, other state-supported trains, and train capacity numbers among the highest on the Amtrak system. This data suggests there is not only significant demand for the existing daily train, but also considerable unmet demand for additional service. Based on previous ridership for two daily trains as well as the experience of other state-supported routes, WPPR has maintained that the fastest and most cost effective way to increase ridership is to focus on increasing the frequency of the existing service and the associated infrastructure improvements.

Norfolk Southern (NS), via an agreement with PennDOT, is presently conducting an internal study to determine its proposed infrastructure upgrades and operating parameters, and

the associated costs, between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg (Pittsburgh line), of which NS is the owner, for one additional daily Pennsylvanian based on requirements provided by Amtrak and PennDOT. This was a welcome development that was a necessary step towards the goal of increased service. As offered in several previous studies starting with the 2005 Keystone West Passenger Train Study, and including, among others, the 2014 Keystone West High Speed Rail Study and the 2019 Altoona – Pittsburgh Passenger Rail Study, a wide range of infrastructure improvement costs have been presented, some totaling in the billions of dollars. WPPR believes that to achieve the primary goal of increased frequency, the state should focus its attention on modest, in terms of cost and implementation time, improvements. The studies offer several alternatives that meet that objective.

The 2005 study conducted by Woodside Consulting outlined improvements for approximately \$111 million (around \$150 million in present dollars) to increase passenger service from two to four daily trains between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg. At the time, NS was operating over 100 freight trains daily along the route according to the study. Recent information offered by NS puts the number of daily freight trains on the Pittsburgh line at 60 -70. Adding one additional daily train as being studied by NS would thus basically increase service back to the level that was being handled successfully 15 years ago. Further, the 2014 High Speed Rail Study, which identified four costly alternatives for enhanced service, also included a Lower Cost Option estimated at \$457 million. Approximately \$300 million of that was for speed increases that reduced the Pittsburgh – Harrisburg time by a little over three minutes in each direction. We contend those reductions do not warrant that large an expenditure.

Increasing passenger rail service between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg will provide greater mobility and improved economic development opportunities in a region lacking in non-automobile transportation choices. The results of the NS study will provide the railroad's proposed infrastructure improvements and associated costs for an additional passenger train. The discussions that we anticipate will follow between NS and the state will hopefully culminate in an agreement to expand service to western Pennsylvania. WPPR thanks the Transportation Committee for its continued interest in this subject and looks forward to the committee's ongoing assistance and legislative support in achieving this goal. Thank you for your time and consideration.