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Debate on Amtrak's Future

CUTTING OIL HABIT REQUIRES TRAINS THAT MEET WORLD SPEED STANDARDS

In the past four months, the fate of U.S. rail passenger service has seen more than one reversal. Up until September 11, even Amtrak's Acela Express looked to be a victim of low air fares and low rail speeds. That changed in an instant. Action January 11 by the Amtrak Reform Council (ARC) recommending restructuring of Amtrak may make for another reversal. The ARC was formed by Congress to decide whether Amtrak would achieve self sufficiency by the end of 2002. Self-sufficiency has been dubious since August, when Amtrak mortgaged property at New York's Penn Station to pay debts. All parties now admit that the railroad cannot run without some type of public support.

Amtrak Board Chairman Michael Dukakis argues that the railroad earned rights to more support by showing it can be "the safety net for our entire transportation network." The value of Amtrak is better understood since Sept. 11, but performance is the problem. Even Acela has not achieved its original ridership projections. In the wake of the attack on America's air travel system, Amtrak is doing well wherever it offers a decent alternative to air travel. At the same time, it has become clear that the service levels offered on most rail corridors will not attract air travelers. And it is painfully obvious how severely American rail service lags Europe and many third world countries.

The primary handicap is speed. Amtrak set a North American speed record when Acela Express started Washington to Boston runs a year ago, but even America's fastest train has yet to measure up to its promise of world-class speeds. As a competitor in the world railway Olympics, the United States is far from scoring even a bronze medal.

The 226 miles from Washington to New York with five stops currently takes 2 hours and 44 minutes, no faster than the 1970's Express Metroliners at 82.6 mph average speed. The Baltimore-Wilmington speed of 102.3 mph that makes the U.S. a high speed player is similar to that of 1960's Metroliners under Pennsylvania Railroad operation.

On the 232-mile New York-Boston leg of the trip the train takes 3 hours and 28 minutes, nearly half an hour longer than originally promised. The resulting 66.9 mph speed looks lame alongside China's 94.0 mph Fex G trains or Russia's 89.6 mph flagship Sokol. (see chart, page 2)

Why is Acela so slow? A European view



is that Amtrak spent enough to have a true high-speed service, but made poor choices: a winding Boston-New Haven route and a train too heavy for the job.

U.S. officials refused the French TGVs originally offered by Bombardier. Federal Railway Administration (FRA) safety rules date from the early 1900's, and dictate heavy cars instead of modern safety features. Amtrak's choice of stainless steel added more weight. Acela axle loadings are 45 percent heavier than TGVs at 23.2 metric tons. Acela's weight per seat, 4180 pounds, is about three times the TGV bilevels, with track-damage and energy consequences. Skeptics believe track costs will eventually force Acela's 150mph speeds downward.

The planned 3-hour N.Y.-Boston runs that were supposed to fix Amtrak's revenue problems are now unlikely. Most critically for its future, Amtrak has now failed to deliver on its promise of modern high speed trains.

Meanwhile, Amtrak's financial slide, due in large part to Acela's nonperformance, has forced the issue of rail passenger service reform to the forefront. Although the Amtrak Reform Council is contaminated by anti-rail figures such as Wendell Cox, other members with pro-rail credentials including Paul Weyrich have close contacts with the Bush Administration and likely will influence the next stage of rail passenger development.

Amtrak's mortgage of Penn Station lands for \$300 million underscored critics' concerns about Amtrak management. The deal bought only months of breathing room, until deficits yawned again. In this debacle, Amtrak lost many of its traditional allies, such as the United Transportation Union.

According to UTU International President Byron A. Boyd, "recent calls that Amtrak be

Amtrak Vice Chairman Michael Dukakis at the Acela launch a year ago. Dukakis led efforts to introduce higher speeds on new Amtrak corridors. Photo: www.trainweb.com

liquidated are largely the fault of Amtrak President George Warrington.... While Warrington and his inner circle of managers have been falsely asserting the railroad is on the verge of operating with-out subsidies, Amtrak's own internal studies, which are kept secret, show that not a single scheduled passenger route, including service on the Northeast Corridor, earns a profit."

"As a result, Amtrak, which perpetually has been teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, is again in danger of running out of cash - this time by March," says Boyd. "Worse, its goodwill is so badly tarnished in the eyes of many lawmakers that calls for its liquidation are likely to be taken seriously this time."

On January 11, the Amtrak Reform Council (ARC) met and adopted three related options for Amtrak restructuring. Under all options, a variety of units would replace today's Amtrak.

A new independent organization, the "National Railroad Passenger Corporation," (Amtrak's current legal name) would disburse federal funds, plan corridor development, manage any franchising of train operations, implement a plan to bring Northeast Corridor (NEC) tracks to a good state of repair, and hold the statutory franchise to access freight railroad rights-of-way.

A new government-owned infrastructure company would maintain and manage the NEC, with "operating shortfalls covered by track use fees" and capital funds coming from "a mix of federal and state funds."

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