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Fey: Rail travel inefficient, costly for taxpayers

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*Riding on the City of New Orleans,
Illinois Central Monday morning rail.*

Fifteen cars and 15 restless riders,

Three conductors, 25 sacks of mail.

Not much has changed on our rural rails since Arlo Guthrie first sang those lyrics in 1972, two years after Congress and President Nixon created Amtrak to prop up the nation's collapsing passenger train system. Despite the authorizing statute's requirement that Amtrak become profitable, massive federal props remain in place.

A newer New Orleans train, this one to Los Angeles, epitomizes the continuing problem. Average seating on the Sunset Limited was around 50 percent in 2012, the fares covering less than half the total operational cost. Tax subsidies reached hundreds of dollars per passenger.

Taxpayers have plowed over \$30 billion into Amtrak since it was born, yet its apologists claim U.S. rail travel is more efficient than cars and planes. To reach that conclusion, they add in the "cost" of externalities — air pollution, global warming allegedly caused by car and plane emissions, "lost" tax revenue, personal parking costs, noise, etc.

Democrats seized on the tragic May 12 Amtrak crash in Philadelphia to pillory the House Appropriations Committee for a \$286 million trim to the original \$1.4 billion per year Amtrak authorization for 2015-19 — even though the cause of the crash was grossly excessive speed. Now they demand \$2.45 billion.

The automatic braking system that Democrats allege could have saved the train and eight lives is already being installed on that line, held up in the accident area partly by a Federal Communications Commission delay in granting a radio frequency permit.

Still, Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., urged his constituents to curse House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, when they encountered jammed highways over the Memorial Day weekend.

It's likely there was no more cursing than usual. Traffic would be pretty much unaffected if Amtrak were shuttered tomorrow — even in the Northeast, where the system is profitable. In 2012, Amtrak trains carried an average of just 85,000 passengers a day, compared to 1.8 million a day on domestic airlines. No wonder: air travel costs half as much per mile (one-fourth after the respective subsidies are included, according to the Cato Institute), and bus travel even less.

Cato also noted that the average American drives 15,000 miles a year, flies 2,000 and travels just 20 by rail. Passenger rail's survival should depend on those who choose to use it.