



Proposal for Northeast Corridor upgrades includes major rerouting in Maryland

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The Federal Railroad Administration is recommending a major rerouting of **Amtrak's** Northeast Corridor in Maryland to straighten the rail line, avoid two aging bridges and speed train travel north of Baltimore.

The proposal — part of an overall recommendation for upgrades to the passenger railway based on four years of input from state and local officials — would require a significant investment and land acquisitions along existing freight rail and highway corridors in Baltimore, Harford and Cecil counties.

Federal officials did not break down the cost by state, but they said the overall project could cost as much as \$128 billion. All the tracks and track structures needed would cost more than \$50 billion, and the new stations recommended are estimated to cost up to \$8 billion.

"While building this recommendation would require significant investment, the cost of doing nothing is much greater," U.S. Transportation Secretary **Anthony Foxx** said. "The communities and the economies of the Northeast cannot grow and flourish without significant, new investment."

The likelihood of that investment happening is unclear. Incoming President-Elect Donald J. Trump's transition team did not respond to a request for comment, but during the campaign he did tout plans to invest \$1 trillion over 10 years in the nation's infrastructure.

Document: Environmental Impact Statement shows suggested changes to rail lines in Maryland

The cost of the overall project would likely be shared by the states and the federal government, FRA spokesman Marc Willis said.

"This was a very high-level look at the whole Northeast Corridor," Willis said. "What has to happen now is there has to be some money to go forward."

The state Department of Transportation is reviewing the federal recommendation, spokeswoman Erin Henson said.

Maryland is home to four of the Northeast Corridor's biggest bottlenecks: the Baltimore and Potomac Tunnel, the Susquehanna River Rail Bridge, the Gunpowder River Bridge and the Bush River Bridge. The recommendation takes into account planning to replace the B&P Tunnel and the Susquehanna River Rail Bridge; it would re-route the rail line away from existing bridges over the Bush and Gunpowder rivers.

Baltimore Amtrak tunnel replacement would cost \$4 billion

The proposed realignment would support train speeds of up to 220 miles per hour between Baltimore and Wilmington, Del. Coupled with other proposed changes along the corridor, it would cut travel times between New York City and Washington, D.C., by 35 minutes, to two hours, 10 minutes.

The new Maryland section of two-track rail would begin in Bayview near Interstate 895 in Baltimore and run adjacent to the CSX Transportation's rail line and right-of-way to White Marsh Boulevard. It then would run north atop an elevated rail line adjacent to U.S. 40. That structure would cross the Gunpowder River into Harford County farther inland and continue north next to the CSX tracks near the Bush River, before cutting across Perryman and rejoining the existing Amtrak line west of Aberdeen.

The proposal would also realign the tracks to continue following U.S. 40 in Cecil County.

The proposal represents the FRA's preferred alternative. Another alternative would involve following the existing right-of-way from Baltimore to Cecil County, replacing the Bush and Gunpowder bridges.

The recommendations would double the capacity for trains running through Baltimore, Willis said.

The preferred new segments are not expected to use CSX rights-of-way, and no specific track locations were outlined in the recommendation.

CSX participated in a meeting with the FRA and other freight railroad operators about the proposal and gave input through the public-comment process, spokesman Rob Doolittle said.

"We look forward to continuing to participate as specific alternatives are defined in future project-planning processes," Doolittle said.

The land acquisitions to reroute the Maryland section of the rail line would include about 183 acres of prime farmland and about 400 acres of timberland, mostly in Harford and Cecil counties, the FRA said.

The new stretch of railway would affect 268 acres of special flood hazard areas and 126 acres of wetlands and would be built on soils with "moderate landslide susceptibility" in Baltimore City and Baltimore, Harford and Cecil counties, according to the recommendation.

The recommended upgrades to the Northeast Corridor also would include improvements to several Baltimore-area train stations. Island platforms would be installed at Odenton Station to support inter-city and regional service. Bayview would get a new hub station, and a new local station would be added in Elkton.

The station at BWI Marshall Airport recently underwent improvements such as new platforms to accommodate four-track upgrades through the station. Baltimore's Pennsylvania, Martin Airport, and Aberdeen stations would receive minor improvements.

The recommendation "affirms Amtrak's long-held view that rebuilding and expanding the Northeast Corridor is essential for the growth and prosperity of the entire region," Stephen Gardner, Amtrak's executive vice president, said in a statement.

"When fully completed, this landmark report will be the crucial first step to improving this national asset and speeding up high-speed rail in the [Northeast Corridor]," he said.

Prioritizing, planning and funding the FRA-recommended improvements will be the next step, Gardner said.

Chris Edwards, an economist at the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, said he supports additional investment in the Northeast Corridor, Amtrak's busiest route, but he thinks it should come at the expense of routes elsewhere in the country.

Edwards favors privatizing the quasi-public railway to lower costs and eliminate service in areas where the trains aren't used as frequently.

"We don't need to spend more," he said. "We just need to get the politics out of it."

Moving passenger railroad tracks closer to the CSX freight lines in Maryland would be done in a way to ensure the two can coexist — "and, where possible, provide increased access to the NEC for freight operations," the FRA wrote in the recommendation.

"Moreover, new segments, new tracks, and checkpoint relief projects defined as part of the infrastructure elements of the Preferred Alternative could be beneficial to reduce conflicts," the FRA said.

The goal is to shorten the train trip between Baltimore and Washington to 30 minutes, Willis said.