



Amtrak CEO says B&P tunnel replacement study may be 'waste of time' given lack of funding

By [Kevin Rector](#)

Planning for the replacement of the B&P Tunnel might be a 'waste of time,' Amtrak CEO says "Why should Amtrak be singled out and get this huge subsidy?"

The head of Amtrak questioned whether a continuing study of replacement options for the troubled 140-year-old Baltimore & Potomac Tunnel under West Baltimore is a "waste of time," given what he sees as a national failure to commit adequate funding to major passenger rail projects.

"There is no money. There is no leadership. There is no delivery of what we need for the future of this nation," Joseph Boardman, Amtrak's president and CEO, said in an interview. "The resources necessary to rebuild the infrastructure of this nation do not seem to be on the radar in a way that actually delivers an action plan."

Boardman called on Congress to create a designated funding stream for rail projects nationwide, saying the lack of secure funding leaves the government-owned passenger rail system unable to make progress on infrastructure needs up and down the busy Northeast Corridor, including the B&P Tunnel replacement, estimated to cost \$1.5 billion.

"I think it's great that we're making some progress on studying it," he said. "The progress we're not making is how we're going to fund it. Without funding for the project we're putting together, are we wasting our time?"

Boardman's comments came as emergency track work due to "excessive water infiltration" in the B&P is delaying both Amtrak and MARC passenger trains, causing commuter headaches. The curving tunnel has for years been considered a major choke point for commuter rail traffic between Washington and New York.

The comments also came amid growing concerns among local transit advocates about funding for major rail projects. The future of the Red Line and Purple Line light rail projects in Baltimore and the Washington suburbs, for example, has been thrown into question after Republican Larry Hogan was elected governor. Hogan, who takes office in January, has expressed skepticism about the projects' cost despite their already having secured substantial federal funding.

That mirrors a wider uncertainty for transportation initiatives across the country at a time when the federal highway trust fund is perennially underfunded and Congress can't agree on how to shore it up.

The Obama administration proposed a four-year, \$302 billion transportation bill, but that went nowhere. Congress instead passed a short-term \$11 billion bill that carries the nation through May.

On rail investment, a similar divide has arisen. Maryland's largely Democratic delegation in Congress has supported Amtrak investment for years, but Republicans have criticized its model and suggested it should be privatized to sink or swim on its own.

It's great that we're making some progress on studying it. The progress we're not making is how we're going to fund it. Without funding ... are we wasting our time? - Joseph Boardman, Amtrak's president and CEO, on planning to replace the Baltimore & Potomac Tunnel under West Baltimore

In August, Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski and Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, both Democrats, joined Obama administration officials, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and Maryland Transportation Secretary James T. Smith Jr. outside Baltimore's Penn Station to advocate — unsuccessfully — for a proposed \$19 billion investment to speed long-term rail projects such as the B&P tunnel replacement.

If funding can't be secured, the B&P project may wind up on the shelf, much like a \$1 billion Amtrak plan to replace the 104-year-old Portal Bridge over the Hackensack River in northern New Jersey, another major choke point for the Northeast Corridor.

"There's not a general national consensus about what is important and what matters, and clearly if we think that intercity passenger rail and the Amtrak matter to the national economy, then there are certain projects that need to take priority," said Robert Puentes, director of the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Infrastructure Initiative.

Part of Amtrak's woes come from the fact that it operates long-haul routes that aren't profitable beyond the busiest metropolitan areas, Puentes said, and the nation has been unable to have a substantive conversation about reshaping how the network is funded without getting mired in politics.

"Because it's a big national system, it's tough to direct investments to major priorities like Baltimore," he said.

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute, argued that Amtrak should be forced to rely on the revenues it is able to generate from ticket sales.

"Amtrak is competing against airlines that pay for themselves, bus companies that pay for themselves, highway users who mostly pay for themselves," O'Toole said. "Why should Amtrak be singled out and get this huge subsidy?"

Already, there are companies such as Megabus and BoltBus that provide transportation along many of the routes that Amtrak covers, at much lower cost and without federal subsidies, O'Toole said.

Though a self-described lover of passenger rail, O'Toole said he believes Amtrak should be making tough business decisions. If it can't sustain the longer routes, do away with them, he said. And if it can't sustain the Northeast Corridor, that should go, too, he said.

"I don't think the federal government should be in the business of subsidizing any transportation, and passenger trains are just a particularly egregious example," he said.

In the recent budget showdown, House Republicans tried to cut Amtrak's budget to \$1.19 billion, though Mikulski and others managed to maintain funding at its 2014 level of \$1.39 billion.

Both Mikulski and Cummings helped secure the \$60 million to fund the B&P Tunnel study, which has identified two options for replacing the tunnel and another to see the existing tunnel redesigned and restored.

Both have expressed a continued resolve to see the project brought to fruition.

Matt Jorgenson, a Mikulski spokesman, said Mikulski stands by her position in August, that more long-term rail spending is needed.

An Amtrak spokeswoman said Congress needs more people like Mikulski "to make the policy funding changes needed to provide the necessary level of federal capital investment to make a difference."

Cummings also stood by his support.

"Meeting our nation's critical infrastructure needs — including replacing century-old rail tunnels and bridges like the B&P Tunnel — will require that we recommit to the belief that we can do big things in this nation, and that these projects are worth the investment of our national resources," he said in a statement. "I believe that as part of comprehensive tax reform, we should significantly expand our investments in transportation infrastructure so we can run our 21st-century economy on 21st-century highways, bridges, and rails."

The Maryland Department of Transportation is in the midst of doing community outreach in the Baltimore neighborhoods that might be affected by the proposed tunnel realignment. The agency

is committed to moving the B&P tunnel project forward, said Chuck Brown, a spokesman for the department.

"Our goal is to move this project into the next phase, which can only be accomplished after we complete the study in mid-2017," Brown said in a statement. "Completion of this study will help us determine how much money we will need for future phases, including construction."