



States are getting on board for Amtrak short routes

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By Larry Copeland and Paul Overberg

ABOARD THE CAROLINIAN — On a recent afternoon, Amtrak's Carolinian pulls out of the Raleigh, N.C., train station right on time at 4:50 p.m. It's southbound for Charlotte, with seven regularly scheduled stops along the way.

About 10 minutes into the trip, the train chugs to a stop at the North Carolina State Fair. Parents crowd on with young children lugging huge stuffed bears and giraffes. The booty is crammed into overhead luggage bins, and the train is soon on its way again.

Al and Nancy Parker, who are returning home to Concord after a day at the fair, make their way to the lounge car for a round or two of adult beverages.

"We love doing this," says Al Parker, 69. "We take the train up in the morning and do the fair until about 4. It gives you enough time to enjoy the fair, and you don't have to worry about the traffic on the way home."

"Plus, no worries about parking, and we get to enjoy our beverage of choice without having to worry about anything," says his wife, Nancy, 56.

The state fair stop is added just for the 11-day run of the event. North Carolina's Amtrak trains — the Carolinian and the Piedmont — also serve fans attending Carolina Panthers football games in Charlotte and foodies heading to and from the annual Barbecue Festival in Lexington.

These state-tailored runs are examples of an unfolding trend in regional transportation: States such as Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Texas are putting some of their scant transportation dollars into Amtrak's regional, intercity routes. The states' investment in these short-haul routes allow them to have a say in issues such as setting fare prices, as well as spending money on things like safety programs and marketing — and establishing special stops.

And once states have a seat at the table, they're coming up with innovative ways of chipping in: They pay for publicity, better parking at stations, free onboard Wi-Fi, better train cars and track improvements. With these critical investments, states hope to increase ridership and ease congested highways while offering people a transportation alternative.

Amtrak has long been a target for critics of government waste and inefficiency. A study last year by Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute found that Amtrak had received an annual taxpayer subsidy of \$1.4 billion over a five-year period. Whether Amtrak's shift to short-haul routes will alter the fiscal picture remains to be seen, yet these new routes often compete against or substitute for scheduled air service. The short runs account for about half of Amtrak's traffic, and they are where Amtrak is showing the most robust growth.

In mid-October, Amtrak announced that it had reached first-time cost-sharing agreements with transportation agencies in 18 states for the states to pay a portion of operating costs on 28 Amtrak routes of less than 750 miles, excluding the Northeast Corridor.

In addition to those short-haul routes, Amtrak operates the Acela Express and Northeast Regional services in the Northeast Corridor — which runs from Washington, D.C., through Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York, to Boston — and 15 overnight, long-distance trains that connect cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles, and New York and New Orleans.

Indeed, the numbers show some upward movement in Amtrak traffic. Its short lines carried 1,469,990 riders in August — a 5.1% increase over August 2012. Ticket revenue ran 7.2% above August a year ago.

The agency has been on a roll. Last year, it collected \$2 billion in ticket revenue, up 7% from the previous year, from 31.2 million passengers, 3.5% more than the previous year. Both totals were records.

WHAT THE TAR HEEL STATE NEEDS

In North Carolina, state officials are using the Amtrak corridor to provide additional transportation capacity in the fast-growing urban crescent that stretches from Charlotte to Greensboro to Raleigh, says Paul Worley, director of the rail division of the North Carolina Department of Transportation.

"We want to be able to provide more alternatives other than automobiles," Worley says. "That's quite a growing area. We expect the population to increase by 30% over the next decade, compared to a 20% increase in the rest of the state."

The increased ridership and revenue are starting to improve what have been challenging numbers for the train service. In 2012, the Carolinian cost \$17.4 million, with 88% from revenue and 12% from the state; The Piedmont cost \$10.5 million, with 29% coming from revenue, 26% from the federal government and 45% from the state, according to North Carolina DOT spokesman Mike Charbonneau. In each case, the state's contribution was less than the previous year as the services become more profitable, Charbonneau says.

North Carolina has increased capacity, expanded stations and improved tracks. It has made substantial safety improvements, including the elimination of 50 at-grade crossings, which were replaced with bridges or underpasses. The state even owns the cars on the Piedmont routes, Worley says.

The North Carolina state seal proudly adorns the wall at each end of those cars. On a recent weekday, the Piedmont left Charlotte on time, precisely at noon. Savvy riders chose seats on the left side of the train, since they knew the sun would be beating down on the other side as it rolled north. Legroom on the train is exceptional, especially compared with flying, and two 120-volt outlets are available for each seat.

The advance-purchase, round-trip fare from Charlotte to Raleigh is \$56, with discounts for children, seniors, college students, veterans, troops and their families. A comparable airfare is at least \$250. North Carolina also offers a discount on 10-ticket purchases and subsidizes a thrice-daily shuttle from Winston-Salem to the High Point train station.

People like the short-haul Amtrak routes as a viable alternative to driving or flying, says Ross Capon, president and CEO of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, a non-profit group with about 20,000 members nationwide.

"They like the fact that you can travel in comfort," he says. "They like the opportunity to avoid the growing expense of automobile travel."

And then there's the digital component. Capon says a great draw for young people is the ability during train travel to be constantly connected to their devices, something that's much more difficult in a car.

BETTER THAN FLYING?

Jean Medina, spokeswoman for the trade group Airlines for America, says travel "is not an either-or proposition" for Americans. "We're biased," she says. "We think air travel is the safest and most effective way to travel."

She adds, "Amtrak is really subsidized by the taxpayer," and people have to check whether they're really getting value for their dollar.

"Joe Public will take whatever mode of transportation is most convenient, most affordable and most predictable," says Robert Puentes, a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program. "These short-corridor trains are right in that sweet spot."

Puentes says the fact that all 18 states with short-haul corridors signed cost-sharing agreements bodes well for the nation's transportation future. "The important thing about these partnerships is it's really representative of how we can deal with some of these infrastructure and transportation issues going forward," he says. "This is a partnership model, as opposed to it being part of a big federal thing that's imposed on the states."

Transportation officials in Virginia, which was the first state to sign the cost-sharing agreement with Amtrak, say the plan supports the state's commitment to offer the public alternatives to driving on congested highway corridors such as Interstates 95 and 81, and State Routes 29 and 460.

"We're offering people transportation choices," says Thelma Drake, director of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation. "We're giving them a reasonably priced, comfortable, car-competitive alternative — and it gets them off our already very congested roads."

In Virginia in 2012, more than 1.5 million people rode trains, an 8.3% increase over 2011, Drake says. In 2013, the state created a first-ever dedicated funding source for regional intercity passenger rail.

Meanwhile, back on the Carolinian, the Parkers are still relaxing in the lounge car. The 165-mile trip from Raleigh to Charlotte takes about three hours and 20 minutes, roughly the same time it takes to drive.

"I love trains," Al Parker says. "For people who have the time, this is really the only way to go."