

## **Off the rails? Amtrak aims to reverse steep decline in Minnesota riders**

**By Tom Steward**

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ST. PAUL, Minn. — At a time when the increasing volume of freight train traffic in Minnesota continues to be virtually off the rails — in a good way — due to an economic uptick, Amtrak ridership in the state has headed in the opposite direction.

The publicly subsidized passenger rail line’s ridership in Minnesota plummeted by nearly 20 percent in 2014, partly due to the fallout from Burlington Northern Santa Fe railway’s soaring freight shipments on the same tracks.

“Reliability issues with the train in the last two years depressed ridership and revenue for the service,” said Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari. “In that same time, BNSF railway has been making investments to add capacity to absorb some of the demand they’re receiving.”

The number of Amtrak passengers getting on and off the train in Minnesota dropped from 175,000 in 2013 to 142,000 in 2014, the lowest ridership tally in more than a decade.

The abrupt decline in Minnesota passengers factored into a 16 percent decrease in overall ridership in 2014 on the 2,200-mile-long Empire Builder line running from Chicago through the Twin Cities to Portland and Seattle.

Previously the system’s most popular long distance route, the Empire Builder also saw a 19 percent decrease in revenue on a line that arrived on schedule just 26 percent of the time in May 2014. Put another way, ticket holders could count on the Empire Builder to be late on 75 percent of its trips.

“Ridership is very sensitive to on-time performance. For a long time, the Empire Builder had the highest ridership of any Amtrak long-distance train, partly because the Coast Starlight, which used to be the most popular such train, had very poor on-time performance in the 2000s due to UP (Union Pacific) track work,” said Randal O’Toole, a Cato Institute expert on rail issues and critic of subsidized rail systems.

Nonstop shipments of North Dakota crude oil, frac sand, crops and other freight compete with Amtrak for right-of-way on the congested, mostly single track BNSF corridor. Weather issues and track troubles also came into play.

“People aren’t going to sit there six hours because it’s delayed. So the more on-time performance, the better ridership will be here,” said Dan Krom, director of the passenger rail office at the Minnesota Department of Transportation. “St. Paul is a huge generator of traffic. In the summer time multiple times a week they add a car just for the traffic coming out of St. Paul.”

Amtrak issued a bulletin giving riders another heads-up about the uncertain route last fall, even relying on buses to shuttle customers at some stations.

“Passengers traveling aboard Empire Builder trains can encounter delays due to high volumes of freight train traffic and railroad improvement work on the route. During recent weeks, these trains typically encountered delays of approximately one to three hours,” stated an Amtrak notice effective through Jan. 12.

The publicly funded railway also adjusted the Empire Builder’s schedule a few hours on each end of what’s meant to be a 46-hour trip. Many would-be riders still took a pass.

“Amtrak kind of did a bait and switch last summer, when they extended the amount of time to run that train,” said Krom. “They started out a couple hours early, and then they scheduled it to come in a couple of hours late, to accommodate on paper for some of those delays. But people that ride Amtrak need a dependable service.”

Critics seized on the ridership decline to question the 2014 renovation and reopening of the historic St. Paul Union Depot transit station championed by Amtrak, among other agencies.

“The ‘true believers’ at MnDOT, the Metropolitan Council and the city of St. Paul led taxpayers to believe that if we rebuilt it (Union Depot), they (passengers) would come,” said Annette Meeks, CEO of the Freedom Foundation of Minnesota, in an email. “They haven’t and taxpayers are on the hook for over \$250 million dollars spent renovating Union Depot for this failed train experiment in 1880s technology.”

Amtrak hopes to turn it around with extensive track improvements now in place in other states and BNSF is set to spend \$326 million more on rail upgrades in Minnesota.

“BNSF has greatly improved its line in that corridor, including double-tracking much of it. As a result, Amtrak returned to the old Empire Builder schedule last month,” said O’Toole. “Although it is too early to tell for sure, the train’s on-time performance in the first couple of weeks, after returning to the faster schedule, was pretty good.”

Current figures show the Empire Line running on time 72 percent of the time in January 2015.

“The train has been running much more reliably than in 2013 or 2014, and we’re anticipating recovery of the ridership that has been lost in the last two years,” said Amtrak’s Magliari. “Will we recover it all in one year? That’s too soon to say.”