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Will passenger rail service return to Las Vegas after lengthy absence?

Mick Akers

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Could passenger rail service be returning to Las Vegas after a 24-year absence?

It won't happen overnight, but two rail projects that would link Southern Nevada with Southern California could get a financial boost from President Joe Biden's \$2.3 trillion jobs bill.

If approved, the bill would finance Amtrak's plan to expand its service nationwide and launch multiple new routes, including one between Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

In addition, the bill could provide funding for Brightline West's planned high-speed rail project that would link riders between Las Vegas and Southern California on passenger trains that can go up to 200 mph.

Regional Transportation Commission CEO MJ Maynard endorsed the possibility of adding passenger rail service to Las Vegas.

"Approximately 47,000 vehicles on average are counted daily on Interstate 15 at the stateline," Maynard noted. "An Amtrak route from Los Angeles to Las Vegas will provide another option for visitors to travel to Las Vegas, helping to alleviate congestion, improve our air quality and significantly enhance the overall visitor experience."

Clark County Commissioner Michael Naft said that both Amtrak and Brightline are attractive projects but believes whichever one is operational first likely will fare better.

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"Clearly they both have benefits," Naft said. "Either option will help alleviate traffic from the 15, which we cannot tolerate more weekends of stacked up traffic."

Amtrak's history

Under Amtrak's 15-year plan for expanding service, Las Vegas and Los Angeles would be linked by passenger rail for the first time since the company stopped serving that route in 1997.

The Las Vegas link is part of \$30 billion in possible projects from Amtrak that would create around 550,000 jobs across the country. Another possible route in the region includes linking Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona, with Los Angeles.

The possible route additions and enhancements, which would connect up to 160 communities across the country, would be added over a 15-year period, according to the Amtrak Connects website.

Specifics behind the possible Las Vegas-to-Los Angeles route were not provided, and attempts to get further comment from Amtrak were unsuccessful.

Nevada Department of Transportation spokesman Ryan McInerney said Amtrak reached out to the department in July in regards to its interest in including Las Vegas in future passenger rail service plans. McInerney had no additional information on Amtrak's plans.

Amtrak's last service that included Las Vegas ran between 1978 and 1997 under the name the Desert Wind, which linked Los Angeles to Salt Lake City with a stop at 100 S. Main Street behind the Plaza downtown.

Daily service ran until 1995 when it was reduced to three times per week, before ultimately shutting down in 1997.

The Desert Wind service had multiple issues that caused its performance to suffer and ultimately cease, according to a pair of RTC studies in June 2007.

The service was considered a long distance train and wasn't designed for those looking to travel between Las Vegas and Los Angeles, according to an RTC study conducted to determine the feasibility of restarting passenger rail service between the two cities.

Between Las Vegas and Los Angeles, there were four stops in Southern California — Barstow, Victorville, San Bernardino, and Fullerton — and a one-way trip took up to seven hours and 15 minutes, which the studies found to be a negative for riders.

By contrast, a car ride from Las Vegas to Los Angeles takes about four hours under normal traffic conditions.

Additionally, when the Desert Wind was a daily operation, it offered only a single trip per day, and the schedule was not made for passengers to depart or arrive during optimal times of the day.

Inadequate rail capacity along the route also resulted in congestion and caused the passenger rail system to encounter frequent delays, according to one of the RTC's studies.

In March 1997, Amtrak conducted a study that identified potential improvements that could be made to the Desert Wind system, including an agreement with Union Pacific to add 20 miles of double track between Kelso and Cima, California. Amtrak purchased a 10-car train set in hopes of increasing capacity, but that service never came to fruition.

Nevertheless, RTC's study noted there was strong "current and future demand" for a passenger rail system to again operate between Southern Nevada and Southern California.

But Randal O'Toole, a Cato Institute senior fellow specializing in land use and transportation issues, questions whether that demand actually exists for this route or others proposed by Amtrak.

“These routes are so heavily covered by airlines, buses and freeways that a passenger train is not going to attract many customers,” O’Toole said in a report responding to Biden’s infrastructure plan.

O’Toole noted the length of a train trip between Las Vegas and Los Angeles and said: “Today, four different bus companies offer Los Angeles-Las Vegas service with buses roughly every half hour taking as little as five hours and 10 minutes at fares starting at \$20. Eight different airlines offer Los Angeles-Las Vegas service with 70- to 80-minute flights roughly every half hour at fares that also start at, believe it or not, \$20. Where is Amtrak going to fit into this market?”

High-speed rail project

The other project that could receive funding under Biden’s bill — Brightline West’s planned high-speed rail line between Vegas and Victorville, California — has been talked about since 2005 but has yet to get off the ground.

Brightline West’s construction was to begin late last year, but that was halted when the company postponed a planned \$2.4 billion bond sale that would have generated the financing for the initial portion of tracks and stations of the \$8 billion project.

The company blamed the delay on market instability due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In a project status update filed Jan. 4 with the Nevada High-Speed Rail Authority, Brightline West said it planned to begin construction on the approximately 170-mile rail line as early as this spring.

Sarah Watterson, president of Brightline West, said in the letter that the project “is on target to commence construction in early Q2 2021.”

Watterson noted the company was updating its funding plan for the project, which includes relaunching the bond sale of private activity bonds that the project could again receive from Nevada, California and the U.S.

Brightline can reapply this year for the \$200 million in private activity bonds from Nevada it used toward its bond offering in 2020, but those discussions have yet to be held, according to Terry Reynolds, director of the state Department of Business and Industry.

Ben Porritt, Brightline spokesman, said company officials “envision a country where city pairs that are too far to drive and too short to fly are connected by high speed rail.”

The company already has a start on this as Brightline’s sister company in Florida operates a high-speed rail line between Miami and West Palm Beach. It is expanding it’s Florida service, constructing an extension to Orlando that is expected to be complete in 2022, according to Brightline’s website.

“Brightline West is an exciting project,” Porritt said, “and as the only private passenger company with intercity operations, we are ready to play a big part in the discussion on high speed rail, which is long overdue.”