

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Amtrak Wants Rail Travel to Be a Better Alternative to Short Flights, Long Drives

Ted Mann

April 4, 2021

Railroad aims to duplicate Northeast Corridor success; critics say \$80 billion plan is waste of money

Amtrak hopes with Biden administration infrastructure funding it can provide more-frequent service and compete nationwide with driving and short flights; an Amtrak train left Philadelphia near Interstate 76 on Wednesday.

The Biden administration's plan to spend \$80 billion rebuilding the nation's railroad assets could enable Amtrak to pursue the ambitious goal of providing a rail alternative to flying and driving nationwide, as it does now on the Eastern Seaboard.

Amtrak planners have hoped for years to solve a flaw in the national network. Legacy long-distance routes travel through cities and large potential markets where the population is growing, but often at inconvenient times and with major delays caused by conflicts with freight trains, whose tracks they use.

Providing more-frequent daily service could generate gains in ridership, Amtrak contends. Critics say it is a wasteful investment in an antiquated network.

"Just because somebody built a rail line 50 years ago or 100 years ago doesn't mean we have to pay to maintain them," said Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute and a foe of government spending on mass transit. "We have newer technologies. They're called buses."

Amtrak's plans largely follow recommendations developed over the years by state governments, and studies by the Federal Railroad Administration under both Republican and Democratic administrations that recommend building out regional rail networks in the Southeast, Southwest and Midwest.

Population growth and congestion in highways and airports should spur improvements in rail connections, the FRA reports said.

"As auto and air travel continue to grow, demands for alternative mobility solutions will likely grow," the agency wrote in a report on developing a Southeast Regional Network released in 2020.

The same report found the potential of significant demand for improved rail connections between major urban centers in the region, while also recommending increased service on "emerging/feeder" lines to areas that have had little or no passenger rail service.

Two Issues That Complicate Biden's Big Infrastructure Plan

Democrats and Republicans are both interested in spending money on the nation's infrastructure. But the two sides don't see eye to eye on what that plan should be and how to pay for it. WSJ's Gerald F. Seib explains. Photo illustration: Emma Scott

An FRA model estimated that building out more interconnected rail service in the Southwest, including some of the route upgrades Amtrak has proposed, "could alleviate demand for the highway system, avoiding up to 6 billion vehicle miles traveled per year by 2050." The FRA's report on the Midwest is expected to be released later this year.

Amtrak said it analyzed thousands of city pairs, winnowing those to a group of 60 that had the lowest potential operating cost, based on projected ridership and overhead. Those prospective routes were then refined in consultation with state governments, which could help fund operation of new routes, as already occurs on routes around the country.

The railway has said for years that its own analysis of rider demand shows more-frequent service between city pairs would draw millions of new riders onto the rails, especially on routes in mega-regions where the population is growing.

"The demand is clearly there for additional short-corridor service throughout the U.S., which includes both additional frequencies for existing routes and establishing new routes between city pairs," Amtrak's then-CEO Richard Anderson told the House Transportation committee in 2019.

BIDEN INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN

The proposed \$80 billion for railroads, part of Mr. Biden's \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan, could represent the biggest infusion of federal capital in Amtrak's 50-year history, and a chance for the company to prove that it can expand the model of its Northeast Corridor service to new cities and regions across the country.

Amtrak runs frequent regional and express train service on the Northeast Corridor, regularly beating flying and driving on trips of 200-to-300 miles. The railroad says it turns an operating profit—adjusted to exclude federal subsidies and a variety of capital expenses—on the corridor, which had ridership around historic highs before the pandemic.

Mr. Biden's proposal "essentially gave life to an Amtrak plan to expand passenger rail service that has been brewing for the past five or six years as we restructured the company," Amtrak Chairman Anthony Coscia said in an interview. "And now you have a White House that really wants to do something."

Company leaders said the administration's funding proposal also would help the railroad attack a massive backlog of maintenance and replacement projects on the 453-mile long Northeast Corridor.

Mr. Biden, who famously commuted daily on the railroad between Washington and his home in Wilmington, Del., while in the Senate, has also seized on expanding passenger rail as a way to lower carbon emissions and fight climate change. The transportation sector is the nation's largest emitter of the pollutants that lead to global warming.

Amtrak's priorities include a new tunnel linking New Jersey and New York City, and replacing a tunnel under Baltimore that was built shortly after the Civil War. Both are bottlenecks that limit service and contribute to delays along the Northeast Corridor.

Amtrak rails in a tunnel spanning the Hudson River between Manhattan and Weehawken, N.J. A proposed new Amtrak tunnel was held up under the Trump administration but now could move ahead.

Amtrak's application for federal funding to help build the Hudson River tunnel was held up for years at the behest of President Donald Trump, who believed blocking the funding gave him leverage over Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York, the Senate Democratic leader, The Wall Street Journal has reported.

The Biden administration has rescinded Transportation Department guidance that was used to justify denying funds for the tunnel project. It isn't clear if funds for the project could come through existing DOT grant programs, or through a stand-alone infrastructure package. The railroad's leaders have said for years the Hudson River tunnel is the single greatest priority among its capital improvement plans.

Funding for both Amtrak and freight railroads—which own the majority of the tracks on which Amtrak operates outside the Northeast—also could speed up plans to operate more-frequent, shorter train routes between dense and growing cities in other parts of the country, such as Cincinnati to Detroit, or Louisville to Chicago.

Amtrak officials responded to the Biden announcement by publishing a map of the new and enhanced passenger service that they say the administration's plan would enable.

The new service would include linking the four largest metropolitan areas in Texas, crisscrossing the upper Midwest, and a starburst of new trains emanating from Atlanta to destinations like Charlotte, N.C., Nashville, Tenn., and Montgomery, Ala.

The existing national Amtrak network serves some of those stops, but often via long-distance trains that pass through major cities at inconvenient times once a day or less. And the majority of the network outside the Northeast consists of tracks owned by major freight railroads, with whom Amtrak regularly clashes over schedule conflicts that routinely delay the long-distance passenger service.

Untangling some of those conflicts—for example, by constructing new sidings to allow freights and passenger trains to more readily overtake one another—would be essential to Amtrak's goal of running more-frequent, shorter round trips among clusters of cities across the country.

“America needs a rail network that offers frequent, reliable, sustainable and equitable train service,” Chief Executive Bill Flynn said in a statement. “Now is our time, let's make rail the solution.”

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, left, and Rep. Don Beyer (D., Va.) last week announced a rail project that would effectively stretch the Northeast Corridor line to Richmond, Va.

The day before Mr. Biden's announcement, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg joined Amtrak officials and Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam to formalize a \$3.7 billion deal aimed at future ridership growth.

Under the deal, the parties will build a \$1.9 billion passenger rail bridge over the Potomac River in Washington, D.C., and the state will acquire 386 miles of rail right-of-way from CSX, allowing major increases in Amtrak and commuter-rail service that would effectively stretch the southern end of the Northeast Corridor down to Richmond, Va.

Federal assistance on bringing the railroad into good repair will make more such investments possible, Mr. Coscia said.

Would this proposed expansion change the way you use Amtrak? If so, how? Join the conversation below.

“You can’t do that if you have all the state-of-good-repair work that has to get done,” he said.

It would also broaden the constituency for Amtrak in Congress, giving lawmakers from rural and western states reason to support funding the railroad beyond simply preserving the long-distance routes.

“They’ve been very clear they see the need for this to serve a number of different constituencies, including rural Americans,” said Sean Jeans-Gail, vice president of the National Association of Rail Passengers.