Keep the Southwest Chief running over Raton Pass!

Amtrak executives met recently with governors, state transportation officials and city officials to discuss their concerns about the possible rerouting of the famous Southwest Chief, which runs through Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico. Instead of running through Raton Pass, a National Historic Landmark, it would take a more southerly route through Texas and bypass Colorado. Because the current route is key to developing future tourist attractions in this historic area of Colorado, ColoRail is saying, “Keep the Southwest Chief on its historic route!”

Diminished freight traffic on Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF), Amtrak’s host railroad for the train, has led to reduced maintenance along the Chief’s current route, resulting in speed restrictions that affect the train’s ability to stay on schedule. The Southwest Chief has been Amtrak’s most reliable long distance train with an almost 90 percent on-time record. The train is

(Continued on page 2)

From a coach window on the Southwest Chief, the Old West unfolds in subtle contours.

ColoRail Ranges North:

Front Range passenger rail transportation will be the theme of the October 1st ColoRail meeting and the Longmont venue will provide a forum for ideas from the regions that make up Colorado’s northern “travelshed” as well as its links to the south. More details inside.

“A Voice for Colorado’s Rail Passengers”
(Continued from page 1)

now restricted to 50 miles per hour over segments of its route in western Kansas, southeastern Colorado and northern New Mexico, and the line may deteriorate further without significant upgrading and maintenance.

Further clouding the issue for a portion of the line is an ownership dispute between the state of New Mexico and BNSF. The current New Mexico governor has challenged the state’s purchase of the northern segment of the route from Lamy to Raton.

Unless Amtrak can find the resources to make the needed repairs, it will be forced to reroute the Chief to BNSF’s main transcontinental route running south from Newton, Kansas through Oklahoma and the Texas panhandle to Belen, New Mexico. This route is maintained to high standards for BNSF’s crack transcontinental intermodal trains. The Chief already follows the BNSF “transcon” route from near Albuquerque to California.

Amtrak estimates the cost of bringing the current line back into reasonable shape would be $94 million for upgrading and about 10 million dollars a year for maintenance. This is a tall order for the fiscally strapped system, especially with the current budget situation in Washington. Amtrak has raised the idea of the three states applying for federal grants to conduct the required work, which would require state matches from the equally strapped states.

ColoRail has taken up the issue. Board members Jim Souby and Gary Carter are meeting with city and county officials to alert them to the threat. They have also consulted with staff for Senators Udall and Bennett, Governor Hickenlooper and CDOT.

“The Southwest Chief is a key economic contributor to southeastern Colorado,” says Carter, “employing nine full-time staff and providing over 13,000 boardings in Colorado each year. During the summer, 200 people travel through the region every day, making each of them a potential consumer or tourist.”

Amtrak, the State of Colorado and communities along the route have made significant investments in station improvements and connecting bus service - a system ripe for increased tourist trade. Souby also cites the future costs if Amtrak pulls out of Colorado.

“It’s ironic that just when demographic trends and rising energy costs are making passenger rail attractive to Americans, politics in Washington are threatening Amtrak’s ability to maintain and improve its system,” he told the La Junta City Council. “With two Amtrak trains serving Colorado (the California Zephyr runs through Denver) it is easy to imagine the Chief eventually meeting the Zephyr in Denver each way, creating north-south passenger services along the Front Range and adding Kansas City and Albuquerque service to Denver, not to mention other destinations.”

Souby said loss of the Chief would preclude this future option.

In a briefing for the Action 22 Transportation Committee, Carter noted that Amtrak employees have told him that a coach added to the Chief for the summer season has been 90% occupied. On September 6, 2011, The City of La Junta passed a resolution supporting the Southwest Chief and Action 22, an association of counties in Southeastern Colorado has a resolution pending. Souby and Carter have been invited to brief the city of Trinidad and are working with local officials to engage community leaders in Kansas and New Mexico.

“As we establish a network of concerned communities, we will need to work out a strategy to protect the route,” Souby said. “Both Amtrak and BNSF would prefer to keep the current route, so this is really a matter of finding a workable solution.

ColoRail Board and Colorado NARP Council Members:
(with telephone numbers)

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- Bob Brewster, Board Member, Boulder, <railbob@q.com>
- Edie Bryan, Vice-President, Lakewood, <twobryans@aol.com>
- Helen Bushnell, Board Member, Boulder, <sunhelen@fastmail.net>
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- Elia Fisher, Secretary, Denver, <eliafisher@yahoo.com>
- Jay Jones, Treasurer, Denver, <sunjones@earthtones.com>
- Jay Jones, NARP Council Member, Denver, <sunjones.railguy@gmail.com>
- Joan Shaffer, Board Member, Loveland, <joansthafer@silverliningstrategies.com>
- Ira Schreiber, Board Member, Aurora, <ischreiber@aol.com>
- Robert Rynerson, Newsletter Editor, Denver. <rw.rynerson@att.net>

ColoRail, the Colorado Rail Passenger Association, is in correspondence and coordinates with NARP, the National Association of Railroad Passengers. Membership in both organizations is encouraged.

Raton as the “gateway to enchantment” - slogan stems from the impressions of passengers coming from the Midwest and East through the half-mile summit tunnel at 7,588 feet, eight miles north of the town. See map on back page.
Front Range passenger rail transportation will be the theme of the October 1st ColoRail meeting and a Longmont venue will provide a forum for ideas from the regions that make up Colorado’s northern “travelshed.” -- as well as its links to the south.

Among those expected to participate are Colorado State Senate President Brandon Shaffer, State Assembly Representative Randy Fischer, Loveland City Council Member and ColoRail Board Member Joan Shaffer, and Colorado Transit and Rail Director Mark Imhoff.

ColoRail President Jim Souby will introduce and moderate a panel to discuss the vision, benefits, issues and challenges facing passenger rail along the Front Range. Other experts are expected to include Karen Benker, former RTD Board Member and Longmont City Council member, Bob Yunhke, Transportation Director for the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project, and names to be announced.

ColoRail is creating a list of key questions and issues that need to be resolved in order to help CDOT and front range communities and planning organizations develop an efficient and customer friendly rail and transit system along the front range. Attendees at the meeting will be invited to participate in the discussion.

The meeting will be held at 9:30 a.m. at the Public Library. It is located at 409 4th Avenue, less than a 5-minute walk from the Main Street & 3rd Avenue RTD bus stop.

For motorists, Main Street is also US287. 4th Avenue crosses Main Street. From I-25, take Highway 119 to 3rd Avenue, then turn right on Kimbark Street to 4th Avenue.

Longmont transit service on Saturday includes an interesting mix of Longmont Local Routes numbered by RTD in the 300-series, the BOLT Regional RTD coaches from Boulder and the FLEX inter-district buses from Fort Collins and Loveland. While it makes for a long day, it is possible to make a round-trip from Cheyenne or Greeley to this meeting via Black Hills Stage Lines, too!

Downtown Longmont offers a variety of services, including nearby restaurants.

You are invited to participate in this important event and to share this invitation with your friends and colleagues.

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Station volunteers keep riders on track

Coordinator Don Zielesch reports that there was a great turnout of station volunteers in Denver for the Memorial Day weekend. The Labor Day weekend effort was also appreciated, due to the drastic travel changes forced by the Midwest flooding.

Volunteers who signed in for Memorial Day were: John Bishop, Mike Cronin, Edie Bryan, Ron Kaminen (2x), Sarah McDowell, Tom Peyton, Vincent Szafranko, Betty and Ron Vander Kooi and Don Zielesch.

Flood-related detours and turnbacks are expected to continue till the end of September.

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Longmont is one of the few small cities in the mountain states that is served by two railroads: the BNSF and the Great Western, making it attractive for industrial and agricultural firms. The former Colorado & Southern Railroad depot at Main St. & 1st Avenue along the BNSF line, now in private hands, served passengers into the late 1960’s. The proposed RTD FastTracks commuter rail station is west of this site.
By Bob Brewster

While contemplating my trip to the National Railway Historical Society convention in Tacoma, WA, I managed to rationalize an "extended" rail sojourn "while I was in the neighborhood." That "neighborhood" swelled to include Squamish, British Columbia to the Mexican border and everything in between. The itinerary included all light rail and commuter rail lines on the coast - all connected by Amtrak services.

During my three-week adventure, I attempted to evaluate all aspects of the rail services: ridership, equipment, speed, efficiency, and accommodations for bikes, baggage, and passengers with mobility challenges.

I was especially interested in convenience issues, including connections to other transit modes such as commuter/intercity rail and other urban transit.

Vancouver, BC -

Starting from the north, Vancouver, BC's three "medium rail" routes use 3rd rail technology and fully automated trains over a mostly elevated concrete beam network with subway operation downtown.

The common terminus is the former Canadian Pacific station which also houses the Seabus passenger ferry to North Vancouver and the West Coast Express commuter rail train on Canadian Pacific tracks to Mission, BC. A very functional intermodal station under ONE roof. Hmmm...

The newest route (Canada Line) goes directly to the airport (YVR) terminal building: A+ for convenience. This system is highly patronized with very frequent headways. Many high-rise residential developments close to the station epitomize TOD. One of the most impressive rail operations I've ever experienced! And it may even make a slight profit.

Seattle -

Seattle's new Link light rail line uses the Transit Tunnel downtown, then operates in a roadway median through a somewhat depressed neighborhood before it soars into the clouds on an incredibly expensive elevated course to SEA-TAC airport, where passengers are deposited at the far side of the parking garage. D+ for convenience.

The aisles and seats are packed with luggage and a bike hangs from the wall with the extended seat and handlebars protruding into the aisle space. Accidents waiting to happen. Baggage racks on the airport train, anyone?

There is also the Seattle Streetcar-to-nowhere in search of a market. One could walk faster while the car waits at long red lights.

The Sounder commuter rail from Tacoma does a credible job of getting passengers to King Street Station which is on the southern edge of the downtown area. One must find a transit connection to reach one's destination if farther downtown.

One big negative: a hideous elevated highway separating downtown from the celebrated waterfront. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Portland -

Portland (our light rail Mecca, some say) has two light rail corridors that cross each other downtown, offering excellent distribution and collection of passengers.

The newest couplet runs the length of downtown and sports a stop by the Greyhound and Amtrak stations. Hmmm.

One route serves the Portland airport, where the station is wedged into the end of the concourse. If it got any closer it would be on the baggage carousel. A++ for convenience. The system is well-utilized and bike-friendly.
California Coast Cities

The San Francisco Bay Area has about everything: light rail, historic trolleys, cable cars, trolley buses, buses, commuter rail, subway (Bart), and ferries. Most notable: CalTrain commuter rail to San Jose and intermediate points. Each bi-level, gallery-style train set has two bike cars, where half of the lower level is for bike storage. Each train can accommodate 80 bikes and some overflow space is often improvised. I rode an express reverse commute train at 9 AM and 3/4 of the spaces were in use. RTD is planning on 2 bike spaces per single-level commuter rail car. Uh-oh.

San Francisco bright spot: the new Transbay Terminal facility that will house just about every rail and transit mode - under ONE roof - is under construction. Hmmm.

San Jose light rail serves the Silicon Valley, mostly with median operation involving sometimes long waits for traffic lights and long walks to the spread-out buildings of the who's who of the tech industry. That's the problem with massive office parks: they're predicated on the automobile. Ridership varies from light to moderate. What they got right: LRT stop at the San Jose train station via pedestrian tunnel (like Denver just destroyed) and cross-platform transfer to CalTrain at Mountain View.

The Los Angeles rail system continues to grow, both LRT and Metrolink commuter rail. Most notable: restoration of Platform number 7 and Tracks 13, 14, and 15 for Amtrak and Metrolink growth, after being removed 35 years ago. Can't do that in Denver due to the "necessity" of new buildings. And LA Union Station is now under public ownership - lesson for Denver.

Of note is the Sprinter diesel light rail between Oceanside and Escondido. The low floor cars have a great deal of glass, creating exceptional visuals and optimizing natural daylight throughout. Makes for a very pleasurable ride. And bike-friendly, too.

While these are only some of the rail systems I experienced I had a tendency to compare the attributes and negatives to what we have, don't have, and should have in Denver. Many of the systems demonstrate the importance of convenient connections - short distances between transit modes. Many light rail vehicles are low-floor with more systems converting. Almost all commuter rail lines host bi-level cars for their higher capacity, efficiency, and accommodations for bikes and baggage.

RTD is behind the curve on these features. But RTD has an essential passenger distribution system via the Mall Ride and the light rail lines are largely unencumbered with traffic interference, except Downtown. Too bad we can't have it all!

One final dig: With a minor exception in Seattle, every light rail system has a very deliberate and convenient (often adjacent) location to the city's train station, enabling convenient connections for passengers, a feature that no doubt attracts riders. Shame on Denver for not recognizing that important element of good transit that it had and then destroyed.

Now if you want to see some slides and video clips..................

(Continued from page 4)
In 2010, circumstances and curiosity led ColoRail newsletter editor Robert Rynerson to make two lengthy rail journeys. On a family-and-friends trip to the Pacific Northwest, he rode 4,645 rail miles. On a visit to the Siberian cultural and educational center of Tomsk, he rode 4,475 miles. The material on these pages is drawn from his May 2011 presentation to the ColoRail General Meeting in Denver.

I didn’t set out to draw comparisons between Amtrak and the Russian Railways passenger service. That idea was raised by a February 2011 blast by U.S. Representative John Mica (R-Florida), who compared Amtrak to the Soviet Railways. In fact, there are some interesting comparisons that can be made that get away from the difficult European vs. North American comparisons.

To start with, both countries operate on a distance scale that is otherwise rare outside of North America. And both countries have the heritage of... The Milwaukee Road. The Soviet Union’s railways were originally electrified following the model revolutionary Northwest U.S. railway’s 3000V DC pattern, with simple feeder lines on wooden poles.

The Russian intercity transportation market is in some ways - air travel excluded - in the equivalent of the US 1930’s outside of a few major corridors. Paved highways reach between most major cities now, but driving is a long, tedious chore.

The newly entrepreneurial Russian Railways has responded with a series of improvements. Private operators are also being franchised. The Russian word in the headline is “Marketing.” One result is the all-sleeper train that I rode, the Tomich, scheduled at attractive times for mid-route cities.

On both Amtrak and Russian Railways, I was able to buy my tickets in advance via the Internet. I might have saved money on the Russian ticket by purchasing it there, but like Amtrak in the summer here, trains often are sold out. In the table on the next page, I smoothed out details of my Amtrak trip to make it more comparable by using sleeper fares and eliminating my side trips.

To pick up my ticket in the U.S. I needed to show my driver’s license. In Russia, I needed to show my tourist visa. One difference is that in Russia I also had to show my visa whenever I showed my ticket.

In both countries, it was miserably hot, with the risk of disruption by forest fires. Both trips took me through major cities and vast open spaces. In both countries, there were delays for summer track work, and in both countries padded schedules aided in recovering lost time. The difference was that the Russians got the time back and customers did not spend their trip on their cell phones giving status reports to friends or relatives.

However, cell phone and other battery charging was a big preoccu-
More reliable than Amtrak

(Continued from page 6)

have a future. Rail lines are being upgraded and rolling stock capable of 100 mph speeds is the new standard for long-distance trains. Service to suburbs is being regionalized.

North Americans are still the champion heavy freight haulers, but Russian Railways is making strides in that field. Freight bypasses are in the design and construction process for several major passenger corridors, which will smooth out both services. And, kilometer by kilometer, lines extend ever further to Siberian resources, eventually to cross the Bering Strait.

To balance figures more closely

- Denver ⇄ Seattle “direct” on Amtrak
  - 4278 miles
  - 60 hours, 45 minutes one-way
  - 4 nights round-trip
  - Fare $1454 adult, starting today, with economy bedroom, includes food.
  - Sleeper delivered in Reagan era.
- Moscow ⇄ Tomsk on Tomich
  - 4475 miles
  - 57 hours, 5 minutes one-way
  - 5 nights round-trip
  - Fare $1202 in “Coupe” mid-priced sleeper, not including food.
  - Sleeper delivered in Medvedev era.

ColoRail Membership

1550 Larimer St., Ste. 271
Denver, CO 80202

Name: ____________________________________________________________

Address: ____________________________________________________________________________

City: __________________________ State: ___________ Postal Code: ___________

Telephone, with area code: ________________________________________________

E-mail address, fax number or other contact information: _______________________

_________________________________________________

$15 PER YEAR pays for 2012 mailings, printing, publicity
Proposed reroute of the *Southwest Chief* would take it through Wichita (at right edge of map), Amarillo and a summit near Vaughn, NM. Albuquerque would be reached via back-up movements. Prior to 1971, this was route of the *San Francisco Chief*. 