Amtrak gets big boost from Congress, grant from DOT, reviews long distance trains

By Jim Souby

Congress has provided passenger rail its best funding support in years! Amtrak will receive $1.9 billion in support, with $1.3 billion going to the national network and $650 million targeted to the Northeast Corridor. Overall, the funding for intercity rail totals $2.813 billion, and represents an increase of $1.3 billion from last year. The new budget seems to quell concerns spurred by the Trump Administration’s infrastructure proposal, which had called for drastic cuts to Amtrak. President Trump threatened to veto the bill if it directed money to build new tunnels under the Hudson River – a project critically needed to replace the 100-year-old trans-Hudson tubes that were harmed by Hurricane Sandy. But Amtrak may be able to use the Northeast Corridor funds to get started on that.

A Grant and a Surprise

Other good news came in the form of a $16 million TIGER-9 grant from the U.S. DOT to support the route of Amtrak’s Southwest Chief, which runs daily from Chicago to Los Angeles through southeast Colorado. Slow track conditions threatened its operation.

The three states are providing matching funds of $1 million, each. Amtrak and the BNSF Railway are each providing $3 million and 21 local governments and non-profit organizations are providing $180,000 in matches. This is the fourth time

WPE: Season 2 Wrap-up

By Bob Brewster

The second season of Amtrak’s Winter Park Express is drawing to a close. ColoRail and WPE patrons are most grateful to those who believed in this concept and brought it to fruition in what some in the industry consider “lightning fast” speed. Amtrak, Union Pacific, Winter Park Resort, the Colorado DOT, and other parties deserve much credit.

Season 2 brought a few operational changes as well as a few challenges, such as seriously reduced snow-

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On a snowy Friday, Feb. 2, Amtrak’s Winter Park Express departs from the ski area for the return to Denver.— photo by Colorado Zephyr

“For Colorado’s future -- ensuring mobility!”
President’s CAB RIDE

2018 will be a critical year for passenger rail in Colorado -- another year to ramp up!

The Winter Park Express ski train enters its sophomore year. Over 60 ColoRail train hosts are working to secure a successful season with 27 roundtrips scheduled. With limited marketing resources and reduced snowfall in early January, this will be a tough and pivotal year for the train.

Efforts to sustain and stabilize the Southwest Chief continue with the filing of a TIGER grant application in December. So far, over $47 million has been invested in improvements to the current route by Amtrak, BNSF Railway, the states of Colorado, Kansas and New Mexico, as well as some 19 communities and organizations including ColoRail. This has resulted in a 20-year commitment by Amtrak to stay on the current route. That time frame will allow the railroads and partners to deal with further line improvements.

The Southwest Chief & Front Range Passenger Rail Commission filed its first report to the legislature and is seeking funding from the legislature to obtain public input in support of a service development plan (see http://colorail.org/sw-chief-front-range-rail-report/). Funding will be hard to come by in this divided legislature, but failing to ask would be a disservice to the efforts we have made to date.

Unfortunately, the transportation funding debate has become insidious as opponents of public transportation proffer ideologically driven arguments and misrepresent the facts. Lobbies opposed to rail characterize it as a highly-subsidized mode we can’t afford, unlike highways which they claim are paid for by users through state and federal fuel taxes. The idea that highways pay for themselves gas taxes is a false myth. Gas taxes pay for about half of highway expenditures.

So-called “privately owned and funded” commercial air services received $476 billion of federal support between 1971 and 2011. Meanwhile, Amtrak, which would rank as the nation’s fifth largest carrier if it were an airline, received $31 billion over the same 40 years. Rail opponents often say: “who would ride a train from Chicago to LA?” Well, according to Amtrak, about 10% of their passengers on the Southwest Chief do that. The more important point is that some 90% travel between communities along the routes. Many Amtrak-served towns have limited air and bus service. Trains are so important to rural America, a fact not missed by conservative Congress members who vote for Amtrak when their leadership calls for its demise.

When you consider that long distance passenger rail also serves as the only alternative to driving for many rural community residents, whether for medical reasons, business, or families, the need for improvement of rail connectivity in Colorado and the West is obvious.

In ColoRail’s March, 2017, statewide poll of recent voters, Coloradans overwhelmingly supported passenger rail, with 61 percent agreeing that it should be a top priority and receive major funding support in any transportation funding measure sent to the voters. In the Front Range, support ranged from over 63% in the Colorado Springs area to an astounding 74% in the Denver and Boulder metro areas. By almost the same margins, voters preferred rail service to bus service.

Highway construction costs now approximate rail construction costs. Rail provides up to seven times more capacity and generates huge economic development benefits. Will these leaders wake up before it’s too late? Let your elected leaders know how you feel.

— Jim Souby

ColoRail is delighted to have received a $1,000 donation from Cambridge Systematics, Inc. for our help in developing the soon-to-be-released Colorado State Freight and Passenger Rail Plan. Thank you!

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ColoRail Board

Jim Souby, President and Chair
NARP Council Member
(303-355-7985)
president@colorail.org

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sarriaga@gmail.com

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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.
Saying goodbye to a friend……

By Bob Brewster

Rail enthusiasts and advocates are mourning the loss of former ColoRail president, Ira Schreiber, who passed away on January 9. Our longtime friend was active in many rail organizations and events. His countless memories, stories, and groan-inducing humor entertained us all, whether it was narrow gauge railroading in Maine, Philadelphia trolleys, or RTD’s rail decision-making.

He spent much of his younger years in Haddon Heights, NJ, where he developed knowledge and passion for the Pennsylvania-Reading Seashore Lines. He first came to Denver for Air Force duty at Lowry AFB, but then spent about three decades in Lincoln, Nebraska engaged in several endeavors, including owning several historic buses. He even became involved in a dinner train operation, now the Kansas Belle.

Ira returned to Denver in the mid-1990’s, becoming involved in various transportation vocations, including driving stints at Arrow Stage Lines, RTD, and RTD contractor Transdev, where he served as an instructor at the time of his passing.

Ira served as “interim” president of ColoRail, bridging the terms of long time-president, Jon Esty, and current president, Jim Souby. Under Ira’s leadership, ColoRail took the brazen step of filing a lawsuit in US District Court against the Denver Union Station redevelopment plan that was heavy on development and light on transportation options.

Another long-time interest of Ira’s was the National Railway Historical Society, where he was approaching his 60th anniversary as a member. He was vice president of the NRHS Intermountain Chapter at the time of his death.

Eyes would roll during his famous mantra: “Money is not the problem, lack of money is the problem.” Now we can sadly add: “Ira is not the problem, lack of Ira is the problem.” What I’ll miss most is what he hadn’t told me yet. His mind was full of transportation information and he took it all with him.

DeFrange inducted to Tourism Hall of Fame

Gary DeFrange, the former Winter Park ski area CEO who helped bring back the ski train, was inducted into the Denver & Colorado Tourism Hall of Fame on March 14. After a career in banking, DeFrange served as head of the resort from 1997 until 2016. Under his leadership, the Winter Park ski resort pushed hard and put up cash to get the train running. Winter Park is now the only resort in North America where it is possible to take a train from a world class international airport to downtown, and then take a train to a world class ski area. DeFrange is a ColoRail member. He attended our February meeting.
past – present – future

ColoRail winter meeting report

By R. W. Rynerson

ColoRail members and friends enjoyed a bright and healthy breakfast buffet on February 17th in Denver’s new Kimpton Hotel Born as evidence of the group’s successes in alliances with other interests swirled around them. Amtrak Thruway buses departed. The Winter Park Express took another brigade of snow fans to attack the slopes of Winter Park. Commuter rail trains and the California Zephyr arrived and departed from tracks that were once not slated to be there. But as meeting participants learned, eternal vigilance is today’s price of good public transportation service. And though railroaders may refer to Denver Union Station as EOT (End of Track), new opportunities might better label it as a beginning point.

Ira

The past was recalled in a memorial tribute to Ira Schreiber, who served as president of ColoRail during crucial stages of Denver Union Station redevelopment. Even as that project got underway, developers and some consultants tried to push their stale 1980’s ideas, maneuvering to keep some buses out, trying to keep Amtrak out, cheering cancellation of the Amschutz Ski Train, trying to gain as much transit funding as possible while doing as little for passengers as they could. That was countered by ColoRail’s environmental lawsuit, which though eventually unsuccessful in federal court, loomed over the negotiations between the government agencies and private property interests. Ira’s leadership helped keep the compromise project on the publicly agreed-upon track.

Throughout those tense days – and before and after – Ira’s positive approach to life and some timely puns made friends and lifted spirits.

A slide presentation took meeting attendees back to the pleasure of past excursions and family events. Participants heard from his family and Transdev colleagues. Allen Schreiber described his father’s passionate interest in all forms of transportation with colorful anecdotes. With many years of bus operation under his belt Ira had enjoyed completing his professional driving career as an instructor. And in perhaps the most unique tribute to Ira, Rick Clarke, former RTD Assistant General Manager, Capital Programs, told how he and Ira became good friends after meeting on opposite sides of the environmental lawsuit.

Los Angeles Metro

Rick Clarke, now Chief Program Management Officer for Los Angeles Metro’s $15 billion capital program, reported on progress in that auto-centered big city. Voters have passed four consecutive regional tax measures. Clarke credited the leadership of LA Mayor Eric Garcetti, -- a “high level political visionary” -- with getting these long-debated concepts moving. The latest ballot [Measure M] -- passed in 2016 with the mayor’s strong urging -- needed a 66 2/3% approval and achieved a 72% Yes vote. Framed without a sunset provision, that permits long-term bonding appropriate for once-in-a-lifetime construction, as well as funding for proper maintenance.

Anticipating the arrival of High Speed Rail, planning and the creation of partnerships is underway to convert the Los Angeles Union Station from stub tracks into a through-running terminal. This will also smooth out operation of Amtrak Surfliners (Coast Line) and Metrolink suburb-to-suburb run-throughs. Clarke noted that the dramatic 1939 terminal was squeezed between older developments to serve needs of the former private railway firms handling mostly long-distance passengers, mail and express. (Almost all suburban rail service was operated by the Pacific Electric interurbans from other terminals.) Crossing US101, immediately south of the current stub, will require raising station tracks ten to fifteen feet!

With a total sales tax rate of 2% — double that of Colorado’s RTD — Clarke noted Metro General Manager Phil Washington’s emphasis on transparency
regarding projects’ status.

Colorado

Andrew Karsian, CDOT’s state legislative liaison, reported on state transportation current affairs. CDOT construction and maintenance has been slowly constricted by inflation and fuel-efficiency measures since the last state fuel tax increase in 1991. (Truck ton-mile taxes were eliminated in 1989.) Federal gas taxes, which now provide 72% of CDOT’s capital funding, have not been raised since 1993. Karsian’s agency estimates that it has a $200 million shortfall on backlogged maintenance. He discussed some of the legislative and ballot initiative proposals currently in the works.

Fuel cell trains

A leader of multi-national Alstom Transportation offered a glimpse into what may be the future of rail motive power. Barbara Schroeder, P.E., Systems and Infrastructure Business Development Director, spoke about a real train that uses hydrogen fuel. The traction system of Coradia iLint units uses fuel cells that produce electricity by combining hydrogen and oxygen, eliminating vehicle source pollution. The service will launch soon in northwestern Germany. Could this technology fuel a Denver to Boulder County service someday?

Alstom is also building the Avelia Liberty equipment that will replace Amtrak’s Acela high-speed trains. The trains will be assembled in Hornell, New York. They will allow more frequent Boston – New York City – Washington, DC service and will be capable of higher speeds than the line currently handles. A powered tilting feature should allow higher speeds on curvy segments of the Northeast Corridor. According to Schroeder, the order is written to allow purchase of additional cars and train sets if warranted.

Wikipedia on the Alstom Fuel Cell Train

The acronym LINT is short for the German "leichter innovativer Nahverkehrstriebwagen" (light innovative local transport rail vehicle).

The Coradia iLint will be able to reach 140 kilometers per hour (87 mph) and travel 600–800 kilometers (370–500 mi) on a full tank of hydrogen.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alstom_Coradia_LINT

Amtrak budget...

Continued from front page

a group of communities have rallied matching support funds to apply for a TIGER grant.

Yet, while we were fighting to support funding for Amtrak, the situation inside the railroad changed. Much to the surprise of grant supporters, Amtrak made their approval of the grant conditional on resolving maintenance cost issues for the New Mexico leg, which are reportedly running $3 million per year. This stipulation was never made public to supporters like ColoRail who pledged matching funds in support of the application.

In the previous TIGER 6 grant, Amtrak made a commitment to operate the train for 20 years, which allowed all the partners time for additional repairs and improvements. Hence, we sought and won TIGER 7 & 9 grants. This is one of the most successful TIGER grant programs ever initiated, having garnered over $71 million for improvements to the route. The TIGER 9 grant would deal with some of the New Mexico maintenance issues, tie replacement, a culvert or two and some signaling problems.

What is new about the maintenance issue? Does it have anything to do with the 20-year commitment and safety of the train? The Colorado Southwest Chief and Front Range Passenger Rail Commission hosted a conference call with Amtrak, NM DOT and BNSF. Amtrak confirmed that this new point of view toward the train exists and also pointed out that the train’s operation is under review for safety issues as well along with the entire system. Amtrak could give no particulars beyond the Positive Train Control (PTC) issues on the New Mexico Rail Runner line shared by the Chief. New Mexico DOT is undertaking a risk analysis on that track segment to determine what safety mitigation measures might be necessary.

The Southwest Chief’s path through western Kansas, Colorado, and eastern New Mexico has light traffic. On most the route in New Mexico the train traverses the track alone (Raton to Madrid). So we hope that the Federal Railroad Administration will deem it safe and not require the high expense of PTC on that segment.

Continued on back page
ColoRail volunteers keep Winter Park Express running smoothly

By Harry Safstrom
WPE volunteer coordinator

ColoRail is again fielding approximately 60 volunteer hosts for the Winter Park Express. Each trip has eight car hosts (one per car). Six people – one per trip -- serve as “lead” hosts who float among the cars, coordinate people and tasks, and interface with the Amtrak crew.

Some observations:

• The entire train can be loaded or unloaded in 10 minutes.
• We see lots of families – out of town and international guests on the train. It is truly a wide spectrum of ages (infants to grandparents), genders, nationalities and backgrounds.
• I would estimate 30% of our passengers do not ski. They end up doing snow cat rides, snowshoe, snowmobile, massage, taking a bus to town, riding the Zephyr lift to Sunspot for lunch or just soaking up the energy.
• My personal feeling is fully 50% of our passengers have never ridden a train – or rode long ago on old equipment. They are very pleasantly surprised!
• Feedback from passengers about the hosts is enthusiastic.
• Passengers love a full range of interaction from “let me sleep” to interest in just about everything. Our hosts make a point to personally ‘connect’ and make this a memorable experience --- and bring them back.
• Reserved groups (clients of a company or company team building) are a lot of FUN. Our Friday runs attract these groups, as was the case on the old Ski Train. We are running only 3 Fridays and most of us believe the Friday group market has huge untapped potential for the future! The equipment and crews are here.
• My favorite mini-group was a birthday party of 4-6 year old girls. On the way home, they were in car 8 (which was then empty as we had dropped off a full car of overnight guests). They were building tents from blankets and having a memorable time while the moms watched.
• When we arrive and depart from Winter Park – we are met by WP employees who usually include senior staff and CEO Sky Foulks and Winter Park ski hosts for a seamless transition from train to area. Overnight guests are met with transportation that takes their bags from train side to the base lodging.

WPE Season 2 Wrap-up

Continued from front page

fall in the first half of winter. Gone is the non-powered cab control unit 406, which facilitated push-pull train operation, and the two Monday holiday trips. New this year are three Friday round trips and a new sponsor: ride-sharing giant Lyft. So, you can take Lyft to the train to the chairlift. And don’t forget Winter Park’s free shuttle, The Lift.

What remains the same in Season 2 is ColoRail-sponsored car hosts, who assist passengers with their ski gear and dispense friendly, helpful information throughout the trip. (See story, above.) Also the same in Season 2 is the lack of food and beverage service aboard the train, which is probably the number one request from passengers. Maybe in Season 3?

But another passenger concern is the application of “yield management” ticket pricing, the confounding practice whereby ticket prices...
| Name: ______________________________________________________________________ |
| Address: ____________________________________________________________________ |
| City: ______________________________  State: _____________  Postal Code: ___________ |
| Telephone, with area code:  ____________________________________________________ |
| E-mail address, fax number or other contact information: | $20 PER YEAR pays for 2018 website, newsletter, communications. |

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**Three sisters appreciate train journey and snowshoe**

*A letter to ColoRail from Lynn Evans*

On February 10, 2018, my two sisters and I took a nostalgic trip on the Winter Park Express train to snowshoe at Winter Park. The experience was wonderful and took us back to the old days when our father would take us on the old Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad ski train back in the 1960’s. Our father was a civil engineer for the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad and a volunteer on the Winter Park Ski Patrol. Needless to say, we had the privilege of experiencing travel by train, skiing and enjoying the beauty of winter most weekends at Winter Park. Those were the days!

On this particular cold and snowy day we enjoyed the comforts of the train, conversations with the hosts and conductors, and the beautiful views outside the windows. Our snowshoeing adventure was so much fun and lunch at one of the resort restaurants was delicious. As we continued on our snowshoe adventure after lunch, I remembered my experiences on the Winter Park Junior Ski Patrol and later as a volunteer with my husband with the Winter Park Handicap Ski Program - lots of fond memories. But as we boarded for our ride back to Union Station and relaxed and giggled about the events of the day, there was one more highlight. As we arrived in Denver we were stopped momentarily, so I texted my sons to see if they were working that day. My oldest son is an engineer and my youngest son is a yard master for the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad. My youngest son was on duty that evening and informed me that we would be waiting for just a few minutes and then we would be backing up into the station -- he was bringing us in! My father would have enjoyed that moment. All in all, it turned out to be a memorable day.

I am writing this letter not only to thank all those who are responsible for making the Winter Park Express a wonderful winter experience and travel alternative, but I would so much like to be part of this amazing organization and would like to be considered for a position as a volunteer host on the Winter Park Express for your 2018-2019 season.
Amtrak budget…
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More Surprises?
ColoRail has learned from the Rail Passengers Association and others that all long-distance trains are under review at Amtrak. Legitimate safety issues based on the tragic Seattle area accident precipitated the review. One unconfirmed example of Amtrak’ current thinking, leaked in Washington, DC, is to reduce full Empire Builder service to three times a week, and add frequency to the Chicago to St. Paul run. This could cause the shorter segment to be reclassified as a state corridor service, which would shift a great deal of cost burden to the states of Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

go up as available seating goes down. The fare-paying public has reluctantly become accustomed to this revenue-raising scheme, widely practiced in the airline industry and on Amtrak’s other services. (One might ponder public reaction if this pricing model were applied to RTD’s Colfax bus.) The question unfolds: How much do higher ticket prices depress ridership, especially among families or others traveling together? Amtrak introduced a new “low bucket” $29 one way fare this season to boost rider numbers on slower-selling trips. So how onerous are the $39, $49, and $59 fares? So far this season, not one train was a complete sellout, but the $29 flash sale experiment in late February came very close. (ColoRail bought a Facebook ad to promote the flash sale. It generated over 2500 clicks on Amtrak’s ticketing site.)

The lesson here may be that yield management pricing could be counter-productive on this trip of short duration. Is a full train of $29 tickets (half-off for younger children) better than one with a variety of fare levels with unfilled seats? Can volume pricing ensure success?

Amtrak is in a bind. It cannot lose money on the WPE, with the watchful eyes of Congress peering down at it. Some members of Congress apply different financial sustainability standards to passenger rail than they do to highways.

ColoRail looks forward to Season 3, which we hope will address these concerns. Season 3 is the last one under the current contract, so it must be successful to all parties bound by it.

WPE wrapup
Continued from front page

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