

Greater Northwest Passenger Rail Service Restoration

Overview

Much of rural America is underserved by long-distance intercity passenger rail options. The March 31 [announcement](#) by Amtrak and the accompanying ConnectUs plan service map fails to recognize that shortcoming and bring passenger rail service to long overlooked communities in much of rural America, including the Greater Northwest, defined as Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and portions of Minnesota and Wisconsin serviced by the Empire Builder.

For many years, Americans living in the Greater Northwest have not had good access to passenger rail services. The lack of service, loss of air service at smaller airports in this region, and the significant economic impact intercity passenger rail service can provide has fueled interest at the local, county, and state level in the Greater Northwest region to join forces to find innovative ways to move our people. These interests, loosely calling themselves the Greater Northwest Working Group, have been collaborating for over a year to support initiatives to return intercity passenger rail service to the Greater Northwest.

Amtrak's plan mimics long-distance airline routes—treating the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountain region as “flyover states.” However, the Greater Northwest Working Group understands something about passenger rail service that Amtrak has apparently forgotten. Passenger rail has multiple service capabilities that airlines cannot match. A single rail line—such as the Empire Builder does now—can simultaneously serve local, regional, and long-distance travel needs. The same train that safely transports passengers from Chicago to Seattle or from Salt Lake City to Portland can *simultaneously* carry local passengers to work, medical providers, or social events.

In 2008, Congress directed Amtrak to review several routes across the Greater Northwest as part of the Railroad Safety Enhancement Act of 2008 ([P.L. 110-432](#)). This included a review of the possible restoration of the Pioneer Line—the only intercity rail servicing Eastern Oregon, Southern Idaho and Northern Utah, and of the North Coast Hiawatha Line that had served much of the populated portion of Montana, and provided the only intercity rail service in southern North Dakota. In its study, Amtrak concluded, “[r]estoration of the Pioneer would enhance Amtrak's route network and produce public benefits.” At the time, now-Senate Finance Chairman Ron Wyden (D-OR) [noted](#) that it was critical to bring “back a passenger rail line that should never have been closed in the first place.” The study also proposed restoring the *North Coast Hiawatha* to its 1979 route. Despite that, the Pioneer and Hiawatha Lines were not restored.

When President Biden announced the American Jobs Plan would direct \$80 billion to passenger rail, Greater Northwest area residents regained hope that they might once again have access to the same intercity rail service that connects metropolitan areas in other parts of the country. Unfortunately, this hope was dashed on March 31 when Amtrak released its proposed service changes, once again neglecting areas like the Greater Northwest, and instead directing the majority of funding to the Northeast Corridor.

The participants in the Greater Northwest Working Group urge correction of this oversight so that we can reconnect our communities to the rest of Amtrak’s network and the country. With President Biden’s emphasis on “sparking the second great railroad revolution,” we believe it would be a drastic mistake if the people of the Greater Northwest were left behind.

Proposed Actions

We propose several congressional actions to begin the process of restoring passenger rail service to the Greater Northwest and other parts of rural America.

1. Coordinate action by the bipartisan group in Congress representing the core of this region to work toward restoring passenger rail service to the Greater Northwest.
2. Formalize the Greater Northwest Passenger Rail Working Group by legislation in the 117th Congress that authorizes up to ten such working groups. Modeled after the congressionally established Gulf Coast Working Group, to be convened by the Secretary of Transportation, the group will be charged to study and develop service development plans for the Pioneer, North Coast Hiawatha, and other routes within the Greater Northwest region as determined by the Working Group. The goal of the working groups is to make the overall system more robust and resilient with enhanced national long-distance rail connectivity and greater economic and social wellbeing of rural America.
3. Allocate 25% of any congressionally authorized funding to restore and revitalize passenger rail service in the United States for rural long-distance routes through a combination of reinvestment in existing long-distance routes and expansion of the national rural long-distance network. The rural long-distance funding will include full funding for restoration of both the Pioneer and North Coast Hiawatha routes.
4. Pass the Interstate Rail Compacts Advancement Act of 2021, which authorizes the formation of up to ten Interstate Passenger Rail Compacts/Commissions, modeled after the Southern Rail Commission, to carry the Working Group studies forward to implementation. The interstate commissions would be formed voluntarily from states who make application to the Secretary of Transportation.

Passenger rail can generate a myriad of economic, social, public health and other benefits that other modes of transportation cannot hope to produce. It is time that these benefits—now enjoyed by urban citizens—be extended in full measure to rural America.

Greater Northwest Passenger Rail Endorsers:

*Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority City of Boise COMPASS All Aboard Washington
Utah Rail Passengers Association AORTA - Oregon All Aboard Minnesota
Transportation for America All Aboard Wisconsin Rail Passengers Association*