

RAILCET

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To: RAILCET TEAM
From: Ray Chambers
Date: December 9, 2024

Subject: APTA Passenger Rail Steering Committee December Meeting

Opening Remarks. HS&IPR Committee Chair Chad Edison (also Deputy Secretary of the California DOT) opened the monthly APTA Passenger Rail Steering Committee meeting with a plea to reach out to recently funded construction projects in an effort to build support for the continuation of the intercity rail program. I agreed with Chad, and noted there will be severe consequences if the Trump team chooses to eliminate the rail initiatives and capital programs in the overall (Department of Government Efficiency) drive to downsize the Federal government. The alternative for Trump is to embrace intercity passenger reform in an effort to create “a golden age of intercity rail transportation—Again!” It could go either way. I noted my clients AIPRO and RAILCET are developing a reform program based on increased competition in corridor expansion which would increase private sector involvement. Recently FRA funded sixty-nine “scoping grants” for new intercity rail projects around the country as a part of the initial \$1.8 billion federal-state partnership program under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. This money examining potential for new intercity corridor projects is now spread across the country. I noted a majority of the projects are in Republican areas with the grants being announced by Republican Members of Congress. AIPRO-RAILCET are giving consideration to launching a grassroots effort to promote a specific reform through Members of Congress and public officials who currently benefit from Bipartisan Infrastructure Law spending. I indicated that to be truly effective, the campaign must be a high-level undertaking with significant sponsorship from APTA or others. I volunteered to be involved in the development and coordination of a broad grassroots advocacy program.

AMTRAK made a presentation on the Northeast Corridor. Buran Rodda (Amtrak NEC) said a total of \$24 billion is authorized for NEC projects under BIL. So far \$18 billion has been committed through nineteen awards. There is a priority on fifteen major bridge and tunnel projects. Last year there were continuous failures leading to service disruption and poor on-time performance. Defective catenary systems are a growing problem. Caroline Decker (WSP—formerly Amtrak NEC VP) was critical of the Amtrak time lag in processing grant applications. Amtrak’s Thomas Davidenko responded there is a new priority to expedite grant agreements. Andy Byford of Amtrak praised the progress being made by the company and called for “a bipartisan effort to keep process going forward.” He claimed Amtrak is making historic improvements on the NEC and the Trump team needs to be convinced. The President nominated four new Amtrak Board Members. The Democratic Majority in the Senate is attempting to get them confirmed this month,

FRA’s Sergio Coronado attended the meeting but made no comments.

Washington Legislative Discussion. Benji Schwartz APTA Legislative Director briefed on a meeting yesterday recommending proposals to be promoted in the next Congressional authorization. They are:

- 1) Expand eligibility for private activity bonds. The reform proposals would exempt passenger rail from state PAB caps (aviation is already exempt). They would create new eligibility for projects with speeds of 110 mph—down from 150 mph.
- 2) RRIF/TIFIA Reform—These innovative finance loans could count toward the local match for federal grants (as they must be paid back).
- 3) Advance procurement of rights of way.
- 4) A separate Rail Title in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Reauthorization. The BIL now contains a separate Rail Title as did the FAST Act before it. This should be easy but is important.
- 5) Reform of the Highway Trust Fund (proposed by Guzzetti). Chairman Crawford (T&I Highways and Transit Subcommittee) yesterday said there will be a major Highway Trust Fund Reform. It may include moving away from the gas tax and toward a Vehicle Miles Travelled fee. Guzzetti suggested we push hard for inclusion of a Rail Title within the Trust Fund in an effort to identify a stable source of funding.

There was general discussion. I stated these were all good items for inclusion in the Reauthorization. I noted the RAILCET-AIPRO coalition will be putting additional legislative proposals on the table in areas such as equipment supply, liability reform and enhanced competition for operations and rail services. I will bring these proposals to the attention of the APTA Legislative Committee at the appropriate time.

Karen Philbrick (Mineta Center) announced a 4-part series of webinars on international passenger rail experience. Each is 45 minutes in length. The next three are:

- December 11, The French Case: Stations as City Boosters
- January 15 – Spain Case Study
- February 12 – German Case Study

APTA Rail Conference. There was general discussion on ideas for 2025 APTA Rail Conference followed by whether APTA should issue substantive reports (White Papers) to provide substance to the plans for a new passenger era. A subcommittee recommended the following papers:

- Lessons Learned in Delivery of Capital Projects Globally
- Corridor ID-- I asked to be on the team for this project.
- Factors Leading to Successful Projects: What are the high points that should be promoted from specific projects?

It was proposed there also be a White Paper on rail project economic benefits and ROI that translates into community benefits and jobs. I seconded the recommendation. A great deal of work has already been done on this subject.

SPEEDLINES. Ken Sislak reported all articles for the February issue are identified. He further suggested articles on each of the White Papers could spread the word.

An FRA RSAC Request for information was discussed. APTA will comment on these issues:

- [FRA Procedures for Waivers and Safety-Related Proceedings](#)

- [OSHA NPRM: Heat Injury and Illness Prevention in Outdoor and Indoor Work Settings](#)
- [Nonavailability Waiver of Buy America Requirements for California HSR](#)

Following the meeting, APTA put out an AI generated report on the meeting. It began:

“Ray Chambers emphasized the urgent need to preserve rail grants and reform the rail passenger program, highlighting the severe consequences of eliminating these initiatives and noting that significant funding has been allocated to projects in Republican districts. He called for a coordinated advocacy effort among Republican legislators to support these goals.”