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OCT 21 2010

TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

P. O. Box 162  
Glendive, MT 59330  
October 20, 2010

Montana Department of Transportation  
P. O. Box 201001  
Helena, MT 59620-1001

Mr. Jim Lynch, Director  
MDT

Ms. Lynn Zanto, Administrator  
Rail, Transit and Planning Division

Mr. Doug McBroom, Multimodal Bureau Chief  
Rail, Transit and Planning Division

Ms. Janet Kenny, Rail Planner ✓  
Rail, Transit and Planning Division

Mr. Hal Fossum, Rail Planner  
Rail, Transit and Planning Division

Ladies and Gentlemen:

My name is Barry Green and I would like to offer my remarks on the 2010 Montana State Rail Plan – Revised Passenger Rail Section, Amtrak Southern Route Study (Chapter 4) prepared for the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) by Cambridge Systematics, Inc. Despite the unexpected delays incurred with the release of this final portion of the Rail Plan, the MDT and others should be glad to see the overall 2009/2010 Montana State Rail Plan near completion for the purpose of future planning of improvements for passenger and freight rail services throughout the state.

As I did with my submission to you last October 2009 with my comments on the 2009 Montana State Rail Plan Draft Report, I wish to relay that the following items that I've identified or remarks that I offer are my own and are in no way meant to criticize those involved that did the research and authored this document. I would like to believe that my comments will help to improve "Chapter 4.0 Passenger Rail". I have also worked for the rail industry for a little over 30 years in Glendive in operations and am also the National Association of Railroad Passengers (NARP) Representative for the members that reside in Montana. I am not an official spokesperson for any of the freight carriers or Amtrak but feel that my tenure within the rail industry should allow me to offer some credible insight. Again, I'm certain some of the items that I've highlighted have already been found or identified by others and will be corrected or updated accordingly.

**Page 4-1 – 4.1.1 North Coast Hiawatha – 1<sup>st</sup> Sentence** – Reference is made to Puget Sound, Washington. There is no Puget Sound, WA as there is a St. Paul, MN. Sentence should read: "and the Puget Sound Region of Washington State".

**Page – 4-1 – 4.1.1 North Coast Hiawatha – 2<sup>nd</sup> Paragraph** – Amtrak did not take over all passenger rail operations on May 1, 1971 from the freight carriers. Some railroads, such as the Denver & Rio Grande Western, the Southern Railway, and the Rock Island opted to continue operating passenger trains over their lines independent of Amtrak for various timeframes before eventually becoming part of the Amtrak network.

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**Page – 4-1 – Note 3** – The Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad name was in existence from 1874 to 1928. Effective in 1928, the name was changed to the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad and was the name in effect when it went bankrupt in 1980.

**Page 4-2 – 4.1.2 Empire Builder 1<sup>st</sup> Paragraph – Line 7** – “Seattle, Portland and Spokane Railway” should read “Spokane, Portland and Seattle Railway”.

**Page 4-2 – 4.1.2 Empire Builder 2<sup>nd</sup> Paragraph – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sentence** – “When Amtrak took over daily operations of all passenger rail routes....” Again, this sentence is incorrect as noted from my earlier comments.

**Page 4-4 – 4.2.2 Empire Builder Operating Statistics – 2<sup>nd</sup> Paragraph – Line 2** – “on-time percentage” (OTP) should read “on-time performance”.

**Page 4-6 & 4-7 – Economic Benefits of the Empire Builder** – Last paragraph as found on the top of Page 4-7 – “However, Amtrak is unlikely to add new long-distance services, which would increase its overall operating losses.....” Amtrak Representatives have made the statement that “Amtrak is beholden to the wishes of Congress and will do whatever Congress directs them to do”. It’s true that Amtrak will not add any new long distance trains on their own and appear only interested in focusing on the most populated and designated High Speed Corridors around the country which is receiving public monies to augment their operations. Future actions by Congress though may provide funding and direction to Amtrak to operate former long distance trains as well as instituting new long distance services.

**Page 4-8 – Figure 4.3 Amtrak Analysis – Two Tiers – Montana Rail System Map** – The contents of the Legend Box in the lower right hand corner is not viewable.

**Pages 4-8 & 4-9 – 4.3.2 Billings to Missoula (Tier 1) – Infrastructure Capital Needs - \* Billings to Spurling** – At Laurel Yard, West 15 Track, or the track closest to the Frontage Road on the North Side of the yard, would have to revert back to a signaled main line as it was prior to its downgrading many years ago. This action would improve the current freight operations in, out and through Laurel Yard as well as increase the speed of freight and passenger trains through this area.

Operations between Billings and Shilo are a combination of TWC/ABS Double Track operations with through train movements reduced in speeds through this area. Reasons for this include the primary street crossings in downtown Billings; the number of switch engine movements that work in and around Billings serving various customers; and Maintenance of Way (M of W) track personnel performing daily track maintenance or track projects. A review of train operations through Billings would have to be revisited with MRL and operational changes made to prioritize the movements of passenger trains through this area as was done during the days of the NP and Burlington Northern Railroad.

**Page 4-9 - \* Spurling to Helena and \* Helena to Missoula** – Comments are made in both segments about the number of curves and the percentages of grade that will affect maximum operating speeds of

passenger trains. While these are obvious statements of facts, they have nothing to do with the effective operation of a passenger train. Many of Amtrak's current long distance trains operate in similar mountain grade territories in both the east and western parts of the country. Amtrak's Empire Builder operates on mountain grade territory and through multiple curves on the BNSF line in NW Montana. With its 11 car consist, weighing 780 tons, and two locomotives, each capable of 4,250 horsepower, the Locomotive Engineer can handle the train with ease and has no problem with keeping the train on Amtrak's published schedule. The same would hold true with a NCH operation through Southern Montana no matter the number of curves or the grade of the track.

**Page 4-12 – Bozeman – Line 1** – Add the word “the” between the words “of” and “station” as is found in the other paragraphs describing station conditions.

Note – If the former Bozeman Station would have to be razed, strong consideration should be given to constructing a new multi-modal station facility between Bozeman and Belgrade, and probably closer to Belgrade, which is where the airport is located as well as the highway route south (Gallatin Gateway) to Yellowstone National Park. You would not incur any costs associated with the former station building in Bozeman.

**Page 4-16 – Ridership, Revenues and Operating Costs – Middle of the page** – The first sentence that states: “The Tier 1 analysis estimates annual ridership.....” – Replace the word “a” with the word “is”.

**Page 4-18 - \* Williston to Snowden** – The last sentence states: “The route is single track, with one 15,000 foot siding.” It should be noted that there are two sidings between Williston and Snowden. The 15,000 foot siding at Trenton, ND and one at Snowden (12,000 foot) which is the Junction where a passenger train from Williston would divert south on the Yellowstone Valley Railroad (YSVR) to Sidney, Glendive, and then points west through Southern Montana on BNSF and MRL.

**Page 4-18 - \* Snowden to Glendive** – It is stated in this segment that “The entire route would need block signals, which would also affect gated grade crossing circuitry.....” This statement is incorrect. There is not a requirement for a rail line to have block signals or active highway/rail grade crossing signals prior to operating a passenger train. It is understood that with block signals, both passenger and freight trains are able to travel at a higher rate of speed, dependent upon the condition of the track infrastructure, but signals are not a prerequisite. Likewise, highway traffic signs such as the yellow advance warning railroad crossing signs and the white railroad crossbuck signs tell vehicle drivers to check and ensure that there are no trains closely approaching the crossing prior to driving over that crossing. Highway/rail grade crossing accidents between trains and vehicles are reduced with active grade crossing signal devices but, again, they are not a prerequisite.

As an example, Amtrak operates two state sponsored trains in Vermont over non-signaled territory. The Vermonter, north of Palmer, MA to St. Albans, VT and the Ethan Allen Express from Whitehall, NY to Rutland, VT. Maximum speed in non-signaled territory is 59 MPH.

**Page 4-18 - \* Glendive to Jones Junction – First Sentence** – Remove the word “or” between TWC and ABS and insert a “/” between the two abbreviations. With the exception of the CTC segment, the remaining segment is controlled by both Track Warrant Control and an Automatic Block Signal system that works in tandem with one another.

**Page 4-19 – Possibilities for Butte Routing – 1<sup>st</sup> Paragraph** – This paragraph is somewhat confusing. Suggested revision: *“As more citizens and officials in Montana have discussed reinstated passenger rail service, some recall the former passenger service along the “Olympian Hiawatha” route on the Milwaukee Road that came through Butte to Missoula (Three Forks – Butte – Deer Lodge – Garrison). The Northern Pacific (NP) “North Coast Limited” operated from Billings through Butte to Missoula (Logan – Butte – Garrison). The NP’s former “Mainstreeter” operated from Billings through Helena to Missoula (Logan – Helena – Garrison). The alternative routes are shown in Figure 4.9.”*

Note – While the route through Butte would offer a substantial amount of scenery, a restored North Coast Hiawatha (NCH) traversing the route via the state capital at Helena would be more practical than trying to rebuild the rail line via Butte that has been out of service for decades. A dedicated Thruway bus service should be offered between Butte and Helena to connect with the trains.

**Page 4-22 – Table 4.6 - - North Coast Hiawatha Costs by Segment** – Regarding the Estimated Capital Costs shown for the Route Segments from Chicago to St. Paul and from St. Paul to Fargo as documented in the *“Amtrak North Coast Hiawatha (NCH) Passenger Rail Study – P.R.I.I.A Section 224 – October 16, 2009”*, these infrastructure improvement costs for the host railroads while beneficial, aren’t necessary at this point in time just to operate 2 additional train a day (1 east & 1 west) along with those trains, both freight and passenger, currently operating over these line segments.

These infrastructure costs are little more than semi-educated guesses. Nothing accurate can be determined without a more detailed analysis which Amtrak even admits is needed. The host railroads appear to toss out large dollar figures to use as starting points for negotiations. Some of the railroads proposals are questionable since they make it sound as though a restored NCH east and westbound train a day will totally destroy the fluid operation of their current track infrastructure. For example, CP Rail’s believes that they need higher speed equilateral turnouts. If they are so critical, they should have been installed when the former Soo Line Railroad did their ill advised single tracking of most of this line segment from Milwaukee to St. Paul. BNSF Railway’s two single track segments in MN is also something that should be have been addressed previously as they have been adding more and more freight trains to this route since the NCH’s 1979 demise.

**Page 4-22 – Middle Paragraph** – The first sentence states in part: “The higher costs for the BNSF route from Fargo to Jones Junction are due to the high costs of siding extensions required for passenger trains,....” Again, this is another incorrect statement. Siding extensions **“aren’t required”** specifically for the operation of passenger trains. It’s true that extended sidings, additional sidings, and double-tracking of main track segments all help to increase the expedited movements of passenger and freight trains between stations and terminals. However, there is not a requirement to have them just to operate a passenger train.

**Page 4-22 – Last Paragraph, Last Sentence at Bottom of Page** – The last sentence states in part: “The total revenue estimate for the NCH was estimated at \$43 million, which included an \$8 million revenue impact from Empire Builder passengers diverted to the new route ...”

The Empire Builder will suffer little to no net loss of business if its current consist remains intact after a NCH startup. This is because a significant amount of business is turned away each year by Amtrak’s own admission due to inadequate equipment capacity and overbooking on the Empire Builder. Overall passenger counts for the Empire Builder, the former and a returned NCH route, have been verified through conversations with former and current Amtrak managers that have been involved with these routes during their careers. There should be enough business for both trains that a reinstated NCH would have no net effect on the current Empire Builder account Amtrak turns away potential business every year particularly during the peak travel season of May through Sept. and holidays. So the notion that the NCH will cause an excessive drain on the Empire Builder is questionable.

**Page 4-28 – 4.5 Conclusions – 3<sup>rd</sup> Paragraph – Last Sentence** – States: “Broadly, the studies suggest that long-distance services would perform better in terms of ridership and fare revenues than would services oriented to Montana alone.”

While I appreciate the time and effort that was put into the two individual state route studies (Tier 1 and Tier 2) to compose this revised passenger rail section, I concur with the above statement that if service is ever restored to Southern Montana, the focus should be on the restoration of the long distance train in the form of a restored NCH.

The Tier 1 study is probably the more practical and somewhat easier to implement than Tier 2. The obvious problem is that it doesn’t connect with any other portion of the Amtrak network. At a minimum, if a passenger train operated between Billings and Missoula, a dedicated Thruway bus connection would need to operate from Missoula to Whitefish to connect with Amtrak’s Empire Builder in both directions. Otherwise, the train should travel beyond Missoula to Sandpoint or into Spokane to make this Empire Builder connection via rail.

As for the Tier 2 route, there would be huge costs involved with upgrading and improving the segment from the junction at Snowden to Glendive over the YSVR. Many, many years ago, this route provided mixed freight/passenger service but never did see a daily intercity passenger train. The economies of scale for either one of these options aren’t financially beneficial as compared to returning a long distance passenger train in the form of the NCH that would encompass several states, serve multiple cities and communities, and connect with the existing Amtrak network across the country.

**Comments on Public Passenger Rail Transportation –**

- ✓ Investment in rural public transportation offers “access” to other communities and services. For urban America, public transportation relieves congestion.
- ✓ Good public transportation can turn into investment in infrastructure to revitalize and provide value to a community. This value may be greater than the actual cost of providing the transportation service.

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- ✓ Highways and airways should not be the only choice for transportation. Different modes of transportation don't have to compete against each other as they can complement one another.
- ✓ Rail services help form the backbone of our economy.
- ✓ Communities should take pride and ownership in the success of passenger rail service through their cities just as they do with their local airports.
- ✓ Investment in passenger rail transportation is a long term investment for the future growth of a city, region, and the country. This provides public value for the long term.

In closing, thank you for your time and consideration of my comments and suggestions. Should you have any questions or would like further clarification on any of the observations that I've offered, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely yours,



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cc: File - Glendive



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### Chapter 4 – State Rail Plan Comments

October 21, 2010

Doug McBroom  
MDT Multimodal Programs  
2701 Prospect Ave.  
PO Box 201001  
Helena, MT 59620-1001

Dear Mr. McBroom,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Chapter 4 (Passenger Rail Service) of the Montana State Rail Plan. I appreciate the Montana Department of Transportation's (MDT's) efforts in updating this plan—particularly by continuing to examine alternatives for enhancing passenger rail service in Montana. And while Chapter 4 discusses both the Empire Builder and the possibility of reinstating passenger rail service in southern Montana, my comments focus on the latter, as I take it as a given that the continuation of the Empire Builder will remain a priority for the state.

In addition, my comments relative to the restoration of passenger rail service in southern Montana boil down to one main point: **the two-tiered Amtrak study requested by MDT is inadequate to address the true feasibility of reinstating passenger rail service through southern Montana due to its limited focus on intrastate service.** This appears to be largely a function of the original scope of work assigned to Amtrak by MDT, as described in section I.A of Amtrak's *Feasibility Report on Proposed Amtrak Services in Southern Montana* (Amtrak Report). Let me elaborate.

The Tier 1 analysis focuses on Billings to Missoula. Given (i) the meager projected ridership along this route, (ii) the capital investment necessary to put this intercity line into service, and (iii) the fact that the state of Montana would be responsible for a significant amount of the initial capital outlay and ongoing operational costs, it is extremely unlikely that this limited route is a feasible undertaking. While the data contained in the Tier 1 analysis may be useful in the future, its utility is minimized by what I see as the lack of viability of this truncated route.

The Tier 2 analysis, examining a possible route between Williston, North Dakota, and Sandpoint, Idaho, is limited in nature, and does not provide the more detailed cost analysis as that contained in the Tier 1 analysis. Although the Tier 2 analysis would have offered a much better picture of connecting restored passenger rail service in Montana to points east and west of the state (albeit not necessarily the preferred route for the North Coast Hiawatha), the Amtrak Study (p. 3) states that "no additional analysis or other financial information was requested or has been provided for this portion of the study, and no ridership

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forecasts or schedule development was required or provided.” This is most likely a function of the original scope of work, but nonetheless is a significant shortcoming of the analysis.

Several specific sections of the Chapter 4 warrant additional comment.

Section 4-3: “Generally, Amtrak is authorized and willing to provide interstate passenger rail service if a state government is able to provide capital costs for infrastructure and equipment, and to pay for the difference between operating expenses and revenues on or an annual basis.” This statement should be modified, as it sets up a false dichotomy between either interstate passenger rail service funded by a state or no passenger rail service. The obvious third alternative is the reestablishment of a long-distance route such as the North Coast Hiawatha, which should arguably be funded akin to the Empire Builder. Failure to highlight this as an option is a significant omission, and leaves the reader with the impression that to restore passenger rail service to southern Montana would require the state of Montana to pick up the tab. This is simply not the case.

Section 4-7: “. . . Amtrak is unlikely to add new long-distance services, which would increase its overall operating losses, regardless of whether these new services might have stronger financial performance than other long-distance trains.” This statement is simply incorrect, since, in other contexts, Amtrak has explicitly stated that restoration of the North Coast Hiawatha is predicated on state and federal policymakers allocating funds for this undertaking:

Amtrak recommends that federal and state policymakers determine if passenger rail service should be reintroduced along the former *North Coast Hiawatha* route and, if so, that they provide the required levels of capital and operating funding to Amtrak. Upon such a decision, Amtrak will work aggressively with Federal and state partners to restore the *North Coast Hiawatha* service. (*North Coast Hiawatha Passenger Rail Study* [NCH Study], p. 41)

Amtrak’s analysis, which forms the basis of a large portion of Chapter 4 of the State Rail Plan, appears cut loose from the previously completed NCH Study. As such, the Amtrak Study frequently implies that the costs of restored passenger rail service through southern Montana would be largely borne by the state. For instance, in section I.A.1, Amtrak states that “if and when passenger rail service is funded by the MDT in the future . . .” Similarly, a few pages later (Section III), Amtrak “recommends that state policymakers determine if passenger rail service should be developed along this route [Williston, ND to Sandpoint, ID] and, if so, the state should provide the required capital and operating funding. Upon such a commitment Amtrak will work cooperatively with public and private partners to establish the service.” However, this assumes that the segment in question is a stand-alone route that is not part of a larger long-distance line. Chapter 4 of the Montana Rail Plan could do a better job of highlighting that a restored long-distance line offers a potentially more viable approach that looks beyond the borders of our state and integrates Montana with regional and national intercity rail lines.

Thanks for considering my comments, and I look forward to working with MDT for opportunities to restore passenger rail service in Southern Montana, and enhance the service of the Empire Builder.

Sincerely,



Dave Strohmaier  
Missoula City Council, Ward 1

## Public Comments Received as of October 22, 2010 on the revised Chapter 4: Passenger Rail Service of the draft Montana Rail Plan

### New Comment

Dear Ms. Kenny:

We experienced malfunctioning with the online comment page so are submitting this comment regarding the 2010 MDT Rail Plan to you by email. We encourage MDT and Amtrak to pursue reestablishment of rail service across southern Montana. The report documents the significant economic value of this infrastructure, offsetting the costs. This kind of calculation is routinely considered in spending on highway construction, while rails have historically been expected, unrealistically, to pay their own way, even across vast rural distances. The report does not in our opinion give adequate emphasis to the superior environmental effects of rail travel: energy efficiency, reduced greenhouse gases, and the encouragement of denser, less sprawl-oriented forms of development.

Lastly, a little own aspect of Montana's rail history is that Indian tribes were in at least some cases guaranteed free rail travel in exchange for granting right-of-ways through reservations. This is specifically true for the old NRR route through the Flathead Reservation. See William Kittredge and Annick Smith, eds., "The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology" (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1988), pp. 354-363. Freight still rolls through the Flathead Reservation, but not passenger service, other than special tourist trains. Obviously, the guarantee given to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes cannot be honored unless the rail service exists.

Thompson R. Smith and Karin Stallard

53950 Marsh Creek Road Charlo, MT 59824

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### New Comment

**From:** DIDI CHRISTMAN [mailto:dddboer@wildblue.net]

**Sent:** Saturday, October 23, 2010 10:01 PM

**To:** McBroom, Douglas

**Subject:** state rail plan

I think the rail plan would be a great idea. I would like to see it happen personally. I think I would use it to travel between Bozeman and Chicago to visit family and friends. I think a more

relaxed and convenient way to go. People in the rural areas would find it the possibilities of travel cheaper and more convenient and perhaps do more traveling because of it.

#### **New Comment**

**From:** Diana Blank [mailto:dianajblank@earthlink.net]  
**Sent:** Friday, October 22, 2010 10:38 AM  
**To:** McBroom, Douglas  
**Subject:** Amtrak

I have used Amtrak from N.Y. to Boston several times and have always found it comfortable, convenient, and efficient. While I would not be a weekly or probably even monthly user, I would certainly avail myself of this service if it existed. I am a believer in rail transportation and would love to see it grow across the country.

Sincerely, Diana Blank

#### **New Comment**

**From:** Chris LaRoche [mailto:laroche.chris@gmail.com]  
**Sent:** Monday, October 18, 2010 11:18 AM  
**To:** McBroom, Douglas; Kenny, Janet  
**Subject:** Fwd:MDT - Montana State Rail Plan - Revised Passenger Rail Section, Amtrak Southern Route Study

Dear Mr. McBroom and Ms. Kenny,  
Though I live in Seattle, I'm from Montana and try going home at least twice a year. Every time I face a horrible dilemma: a nerve-wracking 12 hour drive to Billings, or an expensive flight (not to mention the carbon emissions of both, especially flying). I've been waiting for the day when I could take the train, arrive home and enjoy the views along the ways. I hope this rail route is reinstated!

Thank you, Chris LaRoche

#### **New Comment**

**From:** Celia Bertoia [mailto:bertoiacelia@gmail.com]  
**Sent:** Friday, October 22, 2010 9:20 AM  
**To:** McBroom, Douglas  
**Subject:** Montana Rail Plan

Hello, I would like to see the Montana Amtrak through the southern route of Billings, Bozeman, and Missoula re-instated. I would also like to see that it is less government subsidized (after the initial infrastructure is in place) and more supported through its own income. I promise I will ride it. Yes, do it!

Thank you, Celia

### **New Comment**

From: cherrydr [mailto:cherrydr@imt.net]  
Sent: Saturday, October 23, 2010 9:49 AM  
To: McBroom, Douglas  
Subject: Amtrak service via southern route

Dear Doug, I am a MT native residing in Bozeman. There are many occasions that I have wished to be able to take the train to Billings, Missoula or beyond, both east and west, and really wish for that option to return in the future. Thanks.

Reva Parker, Bozeman, MT

### **New Comment**

From: Mary Keefer [mailto:mkeefer@imt.net]  
Sent: Friday, October 22, 2010 9:32 AM  
To: McBroom, Douglas  
Subject: Comments from Jim and Mary Keefer in Bozeman about restoring passenger service to southern Montana

Hi Doug, Last year I attended the public meeting with Senator Tester, Mt Dept of Transportation and others that was held here in Bozeman. I'm kinda tough to impress but I certainly was at this meeting. The presentations were thorough, the dedication to facing the reality of the costs and yet the service to southern Montana was tangible. I applaud all of you for your work.

My husband Jim and I try travel the Empire Builder at least once and year. We love train travel and think that service here in southern Montana would be used by residents for travel within the state as well as tourists coming into Montana from elsewhere. Although our depot is in poor condition as stated in the report, the investment would be a sound over over a period of time. I belong to a large hiking group here in Bozeman and I did send the report to all of them via email. Most of us are over 50 and we have had discussions about Amtrak coming through Bozeman and there is a general consensus that the trains would be used by our age group.

We hope you and all those who are working on this study can make this significant step forward for southern Montana citizens.

Sincerely, Mary and Jim Keefer

**New Comment**

**From:** Mary Lee Reese [mailto:maryleereese@gmail.com]

**Sent:** Sunday, October 24, 2010 8:33 PM

**To:** McBroom, Douglas

**Subject:** Passenger Rail in Montana

I may be too late for the deadline regarding public comment for the proposed passenger rail service on the southern route, Billings, Livingston, Bozeman, Missoula. However I would like to lend my voice in support of this effort. I believe that passenger service has long been neglected in our country . It has been especially hard on rural states like Montana where transportation options are limited. I would hope that this effort can be successful in returning passenger rail services to the citizens of the state. Rail service of all kinds should be a priority in our country, especially as a national security issue. It is a method that should be available to us for moving goods and people in times of national disaster. I would like to know how I could get a copy of the passenger rail service plan. I tried getting it on the computer, but it was too difficult to read. If you could let me know who to contact to receive a copy, I would greatly appreciate it.

Thank you.

Mary Lee Reese

P.O. Box 338, Bozeman, MT 59771 406-585-9423

**New Comment**

Dear Ms. Kenny and Mr, Broom,

I am in receipt of the updated 2010 version of the "Passenger Rail Service" portion of the Montana State Rail "Plan."

First of all, some corrections.

Section 4.1.1: The second paragraph begins, "When all passenger rail operations were turned over to the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) in 1971..." Not all passenger

operations came under the jurisdiction of Amtrak in 1971. In fact, several railroads, like Southern, Rock Island, and Rio Grande chose not to join. Joining Amtrak was voluntary, but railroads would have to continue running their own passenger trains for a specified amount of time.

The same section goes on to state, "Amtrak retained this service, but reduced it to three times per week..." "This service" is referring to service in Southern Montana. Amtrak did NOT retain the service. All service in Southern Montana was discontinued effective with the beginning of Amtrak on May 1, 1971, but service was revived (with the strong prodding of then-Senate Majority leader Mike Mansfield) in June of that year.

Section 4.1.2: (Referring to the Empire Builder): In 1995, service was reversed to four times per week again, but restored to daily in 1999. The daily service was really restored in 1997, when Amtrak discontinued the tri-weekly Chicago-Boise-Seattle Pioneer and began operating the Empire Builder every day.

Section 4.2.1: "Montana ridership represents almost 30 percent of the total of the Empire Builder along its entire route, even though Montana is less populous than many other states served by the train." This is incorrect. Your 30 percent figure is derived by taking ridership (boardings and detrainings) in FY2009 in Montana of 148,019 and determining that as a percentage of 515,444, which you state as the ridership of the Empire Builder (in section 4.2.2). This is really 28.7 percent. But it's really half of that, because 515,444 riders is 1,030,888 (twice 515,444) boardings and detrainings. Or looking it another way, Montana patronage was only about 74,010 riders, but the Amtrak ridership figure for Montana (unlike the pure number of riders) counts each person twice - once at the station they board, and once at the station they detrain. Therefore, Montana Empire Builder ridership is only a bit over 14 percent of the train's total (which is still significant, considering it traverses 8 states, and Montana is the second least-populous state on the route).

All in all, I do not understand why this is part of the state rail "Plan." The document contains zero planning, and simply mimics other documents. There is no discussion of how any attempts to advance rail passenger service in Montana will go forward. The North Coast Hiawatha study is the classic example. Many have criticized its cost as being too much; on the other hand, the costs of stations is dramatically understated. Your report doesn't say anything specific one way or the other. Your "Montana Rail Passenger History" is woefully inadequate, and if it were more complete, perhaps people would have a better understand of why things are as they are and the challenges in adding service to Southern Montana. You categorize services only as "North Coast Hiawatha" and "Empire Builder." Yet you fail to mention the other trains on routes, such as across Southern Montana on the former Milwaukee Road (discontinued in 1961 west of Deer Lodge, and altogether in Montana in 1964), and other trains along the North Coast

Limited and Empire Builder routes. These other trains are important because they can help explain why things transpired at the creation of Amtrak. The secondary train to the Empire Builder (Northern Montana) was the Western Star, which from its creation in 1951 was a streamliner (it was the Empire Builder when the Empire Builder received new equipment) with many amenities. Its bottom line was bolstered by later being consolidated with the "Fast Mail" train (on occasion) which helped offset losses of operating a passenger train (Great Northern long had the US Mail contract between the Twin Cities and Seattle). The companion train to the North Coast Limited (along much of the Amtrak North Coast Hiawatha route) was the Mainstreeter, which never was considered a streamliner; the train was pathetically slow until the late 1960s, when the Northern Pacific tried numerous times to discontinue the train, and even tried removing sleeping car service on portions of the trip during the day (something that would kill any through long distance patronage). So, it's little wonder that by Amtrak day 1971, the Great Northern trains carried the most passengers, and therefore this route would get the nod to be the route of the sole Chicago-Seattle passenger train. It should also be explained that since the BN merger in 1970, the Empire Builder route, being shorter and faster, became the lane chosen for Burlington Northern's priority trains, while much of the Northern Pacific route was relegated to only local freight service or service for points south of Billings. Later, as the coal boom began, the route through Southern Montana east of Billings received huge amounts of new traffic, but it was all heavy and slow. Since the North Coast Hiawatha was discontinued, there was no reason to keep the to standards necessary for a fast passenger train, which is why today the price tag is so high. While there is more to the story than this, I think such an explanation of "why" we got to where we're at would be of some benefit and might cause some to understand what needs to be done.

Not only is the report simply a repeating of further studies, but it tends to cloud the information with things that are not applicable to Montana. Section 4.10, for instance, explains various avenues that federal funding can be obtained for passenger rail improvements, but much of this is stimulus money or money that matches some kind of state funding. Since in the nearly 40 years of Amtrak's existence, Montana has staunchly dedicated NO state monies to the betterment of rail passenger service within the state, it's curious that these funding mechanisms are mentioned at all, considering that Montana has chosen to not be eligible during their non-participation earlier. By mentioning these funding vehicles, you suggest that such funding could be source to expand Montana's rail passenger service, when in reality, compared to the states who really have bettered rail passenger service on their own, Montana has no chance.

The funding mechanism for reinstatement of passenger service in Southern Montana as indicated by its proponents, is 100 percent federal funding. Due to the startup cost, I can see that this will make it nearly impossible to revive this service. Has anyone within the state

thought of another approach? Why doesn't Montana mirror states like Washington, Oregon, California, Illinois, North Carolina, and others and launch a department that attempts to fund improvements to existing Amtrak service? In Montana, there is only one train, the Empire Builder, but much could be done there. North Carolina just received \$42 million to improve station facilities. Many Empire Builder stations in Montana need work. In Cut Bank, the city is trying to raise enough money to paint their Amtrak station and is looking into buying the facility, as other municipalities have done. But in other states, there would be a state entity to help Cut Bank with funding to better its facility. What can the state of Montana offer Cut Bank? Nothing.

If the Montana DOT had a small department even with a small budget that performed tasks like upgrading station facilities, this could be expanded to planning connecting intercity bus services (like Shelby-Great Falls, Havre-Great Falls, and Whitefish-Kalispell-Missoula) connecting with Amtrak. For a couple of million, Montana could even buy a car or two with the next Amtrak equipment order that could be used on the Empire Builder during the summer (and be leased to Amtrak the rest of the time) to increase capacity, some of which would be bringing more tourist to Montana! In the end having such a department could lead to Montana being considered worthy of stimulus money or a similar appropriation "next time" when such money is released to states who show a willingness to support their Amtrak service, which could lead to reinstatement of trains such as the North Coast Hiawatha.

Will Montana ever consider being pro-active in supporting passenger rail, or will it simply be content with issuing "Plans" that have no planning and simply mirror "reports" that include inconsequential, incomplete data that will certainly accomplish nothing?

I think I know the answer (I've been living it for nearly 40 Amtrak-filled years), but would sure like to see a change.

Mark Meyer, Fort Worth, Texas, (Montana Native)

### **New Comment**

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We believe fully that train service in W. Montana would be viable, especially with our reduced airline service. Many families are unable to travel to see one another when there are poor road conditions, and if airline travel is available, it's too expensive. Please consider the boom in tourism and the community connections that will be increased if rail is returned to the gateway cities of Glacier National Park. Thank you.