

THE INCREMENTAL APPROACH TO INTERCITY CORRIDOR RAIL PASSENGER DEVELOPMENT: PACIFIC NORTHWEST CORRIDOR UPDATE

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Washington State, in partnership with Amtrak, Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF), the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), Oregon, British Columbia and local communities, is leading efforts to incrementally improve intercity rail service along the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor. Our goal: carry 2.2 million people 500 million miles per year with no traffic congestion, no auto emissions, improved safety and no operating subsidy. We've successfully taken the first steps. This paper will outline why this region is pursuing the incremental approach to improved intercity rail, what we've delivered for our customers, and a detailed update of what we intend to achieve in the coming years.

THE BIG PICTURE AND THE INCREMENTAL APPROACH

Approximately 7.7 million people already live along the Vancouver, BC–Seattle–Portland, Oregon–Eugene Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor. With 100,000 new residents per year in Washington State alone, intercity travel along this corridor is projected to grow 75 percent during the next twenty years. With growing populations and thriving businesses, the simple fact is that we need to make improvements to *all* of our transportation systems, including rail, to keep people and goods moving.

Our studies told us that a dedicated 185 MPH passenger rail corridor, electrified or not, would be prohibitively expensive for this region. Pacific Northwest taxpayers and policymakers won't pay up to 20 billion dollars for a rail system that a) wouldn't carry its first passenger for decades and b) would require huge operating subsidies because we don't have the population density to support a "bullet train".

There was, however, another solution for our needs: an incremental approach to rail improvements.

We chose to pursue step-by-step improvements to the existing rail system, with passenger trains using high speed non-electric locomotives to travel at speeds up to 125 MPH while sharing the tracks with freight trains. This idea works for us, in part, because existing rails travel through population centers; we leverage our investment by partnering with freight railroads and other private companies and communities; we don't have to acquire a lot of expensive right-of-way; technology, including trains that can handle our curvy tracks,

is available to allow significantly higher speeds and help us reduce travel times with reduced infrastructure investment; policymakers (and the taxpayers they represent) have plenty of control; and as we invest in rail improvements, travelers benefit immediately.

In testimony before the Washington State Legislature, D.J. Mitchell, Assistant Vice President of Passenger Services for BNSF, indicated that the railroad believes that this program can work, and cited examples in Chicago and California where large volumes of freight and passenger trains coexist. This assessment was based, in part, upon WSDOT and BNSF computer simulations of future Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor traffic. These simulations identified problem areas and projects to solve these problems.

The rail system analysis concluded that operating and capital improvements to provide dramatically improved intercity rail passenger service and to accommodate growing freight needs would require a total investment of \$2.9 billion during the next twenty years. Washington State's twenty year transportation plan currently includes a significant share of funding for this project. Contributions from the railroad, Amtrak, ticket-buying passengers, British Columbia, Oregon, the federal government and other public and private partners will be required to contribute for the incremental improvements to continue. In return, train travel between the Pacific Northwest's most frequent destinations, Seattle and Portland, will improve dramatically for passengers. In twenty years, the current 3 hour 50 minute trip will be reduced to 2 hours 30 minutes; the current three daily round trips will increase to hourly daylight service; and fast, sleek Talgo trains will travel safely at 110 MPH or more in some rural parts of the corridor.

DELIVERING IMPROVED INTERCITY RAIL SERVICE

We've already taken the first steps to improve the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor. More than \$390 million has been invested to improve rail service in the Pacific Northwest since 1993. This total includes \$220 million from freight railroads, \$75 million from Washington State, \$60 million by Amtrak and \$35 million from other government agencies and private companies.

Washington State put our first state-sponsored train on the tracks in 1994. This train, Amtrak's *Mount Adams*, travels daily between Seattle and Portland, Oregon. Public acceptance and ridership were higher than anticipated.

Skeptics said we would only steal from existing ridership, yet ridership on all Amtrak trains on the corridor jumped.

Then, with our partners at Renfe Talgo of America and Amtrak, we brought high-tech Spanish trains to our region so people could better understand what their future could look like. And we didn't just bring the Talgo train into the state for a short tour, we put it into service so anyone could buy a ticket to ride. Since then, hundreds of thousands of people rode a Talgo train. They told us they loved these clean, sleek trains.

Oregon then put some money on the table and extended existing Seattle-Portland service, Amtrak's *Cascadia*, south to Salem, Albany and Eugene. In May of 1995, Washington State completed work on tracks and crossings and, for the first time in over 14 years, passengers boarded Amtrak's *Mount Baker International* to travel between Seattle and Vancouver, BC. The Talgo train was used on the new route. It caught people's attention. For the first six months, more than 90 percent of all available seats were sold.

Since then, Amtrak's Pacific Northwest team, with advice from our customers, made small but important improvements to service. Fresh, local meals are served in our dining cars and European-style bistro cars. At some stations, baggage is collected curbside. Advance efforts are made to seat families, couples and groups together. Partnerships were developed to market the service. Transportation centers and local transit connections were constructed or improved.

As a result of efforts to increase frequency, improve safety and reduce travel times, train ridership on the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor has nearly doubled since 1993. Though we haven't added train frequencies, improved train equipment or reduced travel times significantly since May of 1995, ridership grew more than eight percent in 1996. Since Washington State's program of service improvements began, we're well on our way to operating without subsidy. Our farebox recovery rate of 62 percent dramatically exceeds the projected 35 percent rate for this stage of our program.

NEXT STEPS

In part as a result of this success, the Washington State Legislature authorized and funded another series of incremental improvements to Amtrak service in the Pacific Northwest.

In July of 1996, Washington State signed a contract to purchase two custom-built Talgo trains for use in the Pacific Northwest. Amtrak followed by signing a contract to purchase an additional Talgo. These three green and white custom-built Talgo trains will replace existing trains in our corridor in 1998.

The legislature authorized development of environmental documentation and planning to open the door for the next twenty years of construction. When this plan and environmental impact statement are complete, we'll be able to request construction permits to continue rail infrastructure improvements.

We obtained federal funds to work with our local freight railroads to test a new high-tech Positive Train Separation safety system during the next two years.

We're working with the FRA and BNSF to fully utilize the technical capabilities of the Talgo trains and reduce travel times by 30 or more minutes using existing tracks. Leased Talgo trains are scheduled for FRA/BNSF cant deficiency tests this summer. As a result of these tests, we may be able to take advantage of reduced travel times and add an additional Seattle-Portland daily round trip without additional infrastructure investment.

We're working with regional transit and local communities to rehabilitate Seattle's King Street Station. This historic building adjacent to downtown Seattle currently hosts more than 400,000 travelers per year. With improved Amtrak intercity service and new commuter rail service, this station will host more than 6 million travelers per year in less than twenty years.

Washington State and our partners on the Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor have learned many valuable lessons. Though the incremental approach and the partnerships it requires are challenging, we delivered dramatic improvements for our customers. They returned the favor by leaving their cars at home and taking the train.

CONTACTS

For additional information, visit the WSDOT Rail Office Internet website at wsdot.wa.gov/pubtran/rail; e-mail to rail@wsdot.wa.gov; call (360) 705-7901; fax (360) 705-6821 or write WSDOT Rail Office, PO Box 47387, Olympia, WA 98504-7387.