

Amtrak Ridership Reaches an All-Time High of 25.8 Million Passengers

In Fiscal Year 2007, Amtrak carried a record 25,847,531 passengers, setting an all-time high and continuing a 5-year trend of steady growth.

Total ticket revenue for the passenger railroad increased 11%, setting yet another all-time record.

Among the highlights, Acela Express posted a 20% ridership increase thanks to improved maintenance, fine-tuned service delivery, better on-time performance, and an additional frequency that was added this year.

The Northeast Corridor delivered results comparable to Acela with a 7.2% ridership increase on Regional trains and a 20.7% ridership increase on Keystone trains, the latter of which was recently upgraded to all-electric service with vastly improved track conditions.

The Downeaster Service also grew with a ridership increase of 5.3%, partly attributed to an additional roundtrip that was added this year.

The Midwestern Corridors are still experiencing phenomenal growth, especially with the State of Illinois investing in additional services. Lincoln Service grew by 55.8%, the Chicago-Quincy routes gained 41%, and the Chicago-Carbondale routes gained an astounding 67.4%.

Every Amtrak route in the State of Michigan experienced modest growth in 2007 despite the fact that the region has suffered terrible economic hardships. The state supported Blue Water and Pere Marquette routes grew by 2.8% and 3.1%, respectively, and the Chicago-Detroit routes grew by 4.1%.

California's Capitol Corridor and Surfliner routes continue to amaze the public with 15% and 21% respective growth, proving that the most auto-oriented state in the nation is turning to the rails.

Amtrak's long-distance routes were equally impressive in 2007. The Sunset Limited route, one of Amtrak's most criticized services, grew by an amazing 22% this fiscal year. Most other long-distance routes, including the New York-Florida Silver Service, the Cardinal, Crescent, and Southwest Chief routes grew by healthy one-digit figures between 2% and 7% apiece.

Continued on page 3...

Highway Crisis: A Very Real Problem!

A number of newspaper columnists and elected officials around the country are expressly concerned about the mobility of the American public both now and in the future – and they should be concerned!

Passenger rail advocates have been shouting for decades that our national transportation policy would one day become its own worst enemy.

As it stands now, the Highway Trust Fund is barely able to stay afloat. Highways all across the country are choked beyond their design capacity. The costs to build new highways and bridges has escalated to an overwhelming level.

Some politicians and think-tanks advocate pouring more money into our national highway system not realizing that doing so will only extend the problem, not solve it.

At long last, however, we are seeing a real shift in the debate. For the first time ever, states and municipalities are looking into a more balanced transportation policy combined with sustainable community development strategies.

With solutions like these coming from the grassroots, we can hope that Washington will soon take notice! TN

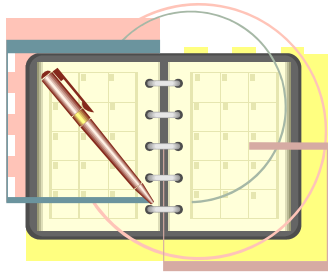
In This Issue

Opinion-Editorial
pg. 2

Revised Dining Service on
the *City of New Orleans*
pg. 3

Passenger Rail Highlights
pg. 4

Op-Ed



The law of diminishing return, when applied to auto-clogged highways, states that when a new lane is added to an existing highway, it too becomes clogged with autos. Planning experts know this. That's why Charlotte, Austin, Denver, Salt Lake City, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Albuquerque and other comparable cities are installing light and heavy commuter rail systems. Those cities are using successful systems in Portland, Sacramento, Dallas, Miami, San Diego and others metropolitan areas as models.

Annual double-digit growth on the newly installed rail systems indicate people are willing to leave their cars at home when a comfortable and reliable alternative is available. Twenty years ago who would have

guessed southern California would have a burgeoning network of rail lines that's been continually expanded at voters' request. If the auto-worshipping west coast is willing to abandon building more monuments to urban sprawl, read freeways, surely middle Tennessee should give commuter rail a chance to succeed. The experts say it's the wave of the future.

Here's a question that needs an answer. Why would you invest millions of dollars in a commuter rail corridor between Lebanon and Nashville and then have TDOT planning to expand parallel Highway 70 to four lanes at a half million dollars per mile? Where's the incentive for people to leave their cars at home if you keep expanding highways?

Some have argued that commuter trains depress property values. That's simply not true. Look at residential real estate ads in newspapers where mature commuter rail lines exist. Accessible rail transportation is an asset that increases residential property values. In those cities, retail space near commuter rail stations is at a premium because of the daily captive market.

The immediate question is, what should we do with the Music City Star?

There's nothing wrong with the existing system, such as it is. The problem begins and ends with how it's been marketed. Outside of a few press releases and a hand-full of unimaginative billboards, nothing creative has been done to promote the service to its most likely patrons. There's been more coverage, mostly negative, about the Music City Star in the last few weeks than there's been all year.

Here's some suggestions. Let's take a commuter stuck in traffic on I-40. Most likely he's going to tune his radio to a station with traffic reports to find out why he's not moving. What if the report was sponsored by the Music City Star and the tagline was "...and the Star is running on time today....are you?"

What if a prospective passenger could ride the Star free for a month? Don't you think the true believers already riding the train would tell their friends and co-workers to give it a try? After a couple of weeks of not having to fight auto traffic, most would be converts.

Do trains run to Titans and Predators games or to the annual Fourth of July riverfront celebration? If they do, it's a well-kept secret.

How about running free trips for school children in outlying areas to downtown Nashville and include a brief trolley ride? It could be a field trip that introduces the train to parents and teachers and an opportunity for students to discuss the impact different transportation modes have on the environment.

Where's the large Music City Star banner that should be hanging over Briley Parkway from the new railroad bridge near Opryland? The space should be made available to RTA at no cost since the bridge was built with taxpayers' dollars.

How about a free round trip ticket printed on the back of supermarket check-out receipts? How about a tie-in with fast food restaurants located where auto commuters are most likely to grab-and-go? Give them a free train ride with their meal purchase and maybe they'll give it a try.

Try enhancing the rail commuting experience by allowing mobile vendors to sell breakfast and coffee-to-go at the train stations. Franchise the vendor spots and earn a buck doing it. Expand the feeder bus network downtown so riders won't have to change busses. If there's not enough volume, use vans or taxis until the demand grows.

Organize a commuters' club where regular riders have an opportunity to win valuable prizes at monthly drawings held on board their train. How many people will the prize winner tell her story to the next week?

Come on RTA. This is basic marketing 101. You haven't adequately exposed your product to the public or your ridership numbers would be better. Nashville is not that different from Albuquerque or Charlotte. Take a lesson from retailers; free rides are loss leaders. You've successfully branded the Music City Star but the service has no image. Create a hip cool image of the smart, thrifty and environmentally conscious train rider. Contrast him with the harried stressed-out interstate jockey moving along at 10 mph.

The metropolitan area population is projected to more than double in the next twenty years. If we let commuter rail die in its infancy, we'll live to regret it.

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The City of New Orleans Welcomes Revised Dining Service

Effective with the Winter 07/08 timetable, Amtrak's *City of New Orleans*, the only route serving the Volunteer State, will switch from traditional dining service to a specially-designed version of the Simplified Dining Service concept.



As expected, the SDS concept will combine the dining car and lounge car functions into a single car that is custom-designed for this purpose; however, the version of the car that will ride on the *City of New Orleans* will have a flavor all its own!

The all-new Cross Country Café will feature regional specialties such as jambalaya and bread pudding to represent the cultural heritage of this much-celebrated train route. This car will also offer continuous meal and beverage service throughout the day - a flexibility that traditional dining service does not afford.

Another innovation for the *City of New Orleans* will be an all-new early boarding process for passengers at Chicago Union Station. The Cross Country Café will be open for business during early boarding so that the car can earn revenue even before leaving the station.

The changes being made to the *City of New Orleans* route are the first of several changes that are planned across the system. Unofficial sources say that Amtrak routes that traditionally have a lower volume of food and beverage sales will receive some form of simplified dining service. By switching to SDS, these routes can demonstrate better cost controls while adding an extra measure of flexibility to meet the needs of customers.

As for the train routes that do a high volume of food and beverage service, the general consensus is that Amtrak will retain traditional dining service, albeit with some revisions and enhancements. However, Amtrak has not revealed any official plans as of yet.

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Amtrak ridership....continued from page 1

Much to the satisfaction of Tennessee rail advocates, the City of New Orleans posted a healthy 3% ridership increase.

There were a few disappointments, however. The California Zephyr, the Texas Eagle, and the Lake Shore Limited each posted a modest ridership decline this year, possibly attributed to very poor on-time performance. Fortunately, the California Zephyr has posting much better OTP in the last few months following a schedule adjustment.

The state-supported services in Missouri between St. Louis and Kansas City also declined modestly, a trend that may also be attributed to very poor on-time performance.

Amtrak's overall success this year is due in part to many important factors. Gasoline prices have been at record highs and highway grid-lock is reaching unconscionable levels across the country, both of which have made rail travel all the more appealing. It is also important to note that air travel in the US is falling on hard times with growing fuel prices, more and more air traffic control issues, and airport crowd-control problems due to extraordinary new security measures.

However, we must also give credit to Amtrak employees for their hard work and dedication even amidst worries about funding, equipment shortages, out-of-date labor contracts, and scarce resources in some areas. Despite all these limitations, Amtrak's credibility has grown along with its ridership.

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Passenger Rail News Briefs

As of press time, the US Senate passed **S. 294**, by a veto-proof margin. S. 294 provides a 6-year authorization of \$11.4 billion dollar including \$1.4 billion in matching state grants. S. 294 does not include any damaging language that micro-manages Amtrak operations, particularly food service.....Progress is finally underway to upgrade and expand New York's **Pennsylvania Station** using the former Farley Post Office building across the street. Amtrak management had originally declined to participate in the expansion citing financial worries, but that sentiment is completely reversed and Amtrak operations will be fully integrated into the expansion.....The Canadian government is authorizing one of the largest and most significant investments in **VIA Rail Canada** in the 28-year history of the company. Plans include equipment and station upgrades as well as infrastructure improvements to help restore reliability on some lines.....Commuter Rail Service in the greater **Salt Lake City** area has been so successful that a former political opponent has disclosed that he had "eat crow on this one". Ridership was originally planned to be around 16,000 commuters, but turned out to be around 50,000 in the Year 2006!.....

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