



Testimony of
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Pennsylvania Department of Transportation
Ongoing Efforts to Improve Passenger Rail Service in Western Pennsylvania
House Transportation Committee
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Good afternoon, Chairman Hennessey, Chairman Carroll, members of the committee and staff. My name is Jennie Granger, and I am the Deputy Secretary of Multimodal Transportation for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. On behalf of Secretary Leslie Richards, thank you for the opportunity to testify before all of you today to discuss ongoing efforts to improve passenger rail service in western Pennsylvania.

I would like to take the opportunity today to report on three items:

- 1) A Study of the feasibility of passenger rail service from Altoona to Pittsburgh;
- 2) An ongoing effort to identify funding and capital improvements required to add additional service on the Pennsylvanian Amtrak Service between Pittsburgh and New York; and
- 3) The addition of baggage cars to the Pennsylvanian Amtrak Service, which will accommodate bicycles.

A Study of the Feasibility of Passenger Rail Service from Altoona to Pittsburgh

Over the past 15 years, there have been several studies examining the potential for increased passenger rail service west of Harrisburg. These studies varied from extending the existing Keystone Service to Pittsburgh, to implementing commuter rail service between Pittsburgh and Latrobe, to adding another daily Pennsylvanian train. The previous studies along the Altoona–Pittsburgh corridor indicate that there is continued interest in expanded passenger rail service.

The Altoona to Pittsburgh Passenger Rail Study was initiated in September 2018 to analyze potential service levels and associated ridership estimates, as well as infrastructure needs and estimated capital costs to support passenger rail/commuter service on the 117-mile corridor between Altoona and Pittsburgh. This rail corridor is owned by Norfolk Southern (NS) and currently Amtrak operates the Pennsylvanian service through this corridor, connecting Pittsburgh to Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and ultimately on to New York City.

The study was just finalized and has been posted on our Plan the Keystone website under the resources tab: <http://www.planthekeystone.com/Pages/Altoona-Pittsburgh-Study.aspx>.

Previous studies provided us with insight to the significant challenges in implementing reliable passenger service, including infrastructure investment necessary to improve ADA accessibility at existing stations and to accommodate freight needs along the corridor. In particular, the most recent study, the 2014 Keystone West High Speed Rail Study, provided the basis for the high-level infrastructure assessment and associated capital costs identified in this study.

A high-level travel demand market assessment was included as part of the study to understand the potential demand for passenger rail/commuter service between Altoona and Pittsburgh. A comparison of relatively new peer commuter and intercity rail lines throughout the country was included to help identify similarities and differences as a reference. At 117-miles, the length of the Altoona-Pittsburgh corridor falls between a traditional commuter rail line (typically 20-40 miles) and an Amtrak regional rail line. In addition, the Altoona-Pittsburgh corridor differs from peer commuter rail systems with Pittsburgh having a lower population than the primary city populations of most peer systems.

The ridership analysis indicated more than half of the inbound commuters (traveling toward Pittsburgh) would be boarding at the previous stop in Greensburg, located 31 miles to the east. Commuter service between Greensburg, Latrobe and Pittsburgh is currently provided by Westmoreland Transit. Current travel time on Westmoreland Transit bus between Greensburg and Pittsburgh is approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. The analysis suggests there is a potential for reverse peak and/or mid-day service to Altoona or Greensburg from Pittsburgh; however, there is not a considerable number of passengers likely to commute between the intermediate stations.

Potential service plans were also identified as part of the study. It is important to note that at this preliminary stage, these hypothetical service plans/schedules did not consider existing or future NS freight schedules. Based on an evaluation of peer start-up passenger rail systems, the recommended minimum start-up commuter service for the Altoona-Pittsburgh corridor is three to six trains in the morning and afternoon peak travel times.

In addition to the concerns previously mentioned, the study identifies capital cost estimates ranging from \$1.2 billion to \$3.7 billion (with the addition of a third track) to support passenger rail start-up service for a forecasted 531 to 840 daily one-way riders. The capital cost estimates do not include right-of-way acquisition, environmental remediation, or Norfolk-Southern-related costs for access or liability. These components, which would be studied and quantified in greater detail if the funding was identified, would increase the base costs of \$1.2 billion to \$3.7 billion.

At this time, based on the findings of the study, the Department will not be advancing detailed study of dedicated service between Altoona and Pittsburgh. However, the Department continues to strive to improve passenger rail service to western Pennsylvania. This leads me to report on my second item.

Ongoing effort to identify funding and capital improvements required to add additional service on the Pennsylvanian Amtrak Service between Pittsburgh and New York

The Department has received numerous requests over time to help facilitate additional round trips on the Amtrak Pennsylvanian Service, which provides service between Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and, ultimately, New York. Currently there is one round trip a day on the Pennsylvanian.

The track which Amtrak provides this service on between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg is owned by NS, and as such, NS approval is required to add additional service. In addition, the Commonwealth would need to provide additional subsidies to Amtrak for the additional service, and potentially invest in capital improvements on the rail line in order to avoid any conflicts between existing NS freight service and additional passenger service.

The Department received a proposed time table/schedule for an additional round trip a day from Amtrak earlier this year. We have forwarded this proposed schedule to NS and are currently working on an agreement with NS to pay them to complete the analysis and study required. The results will determine whether this proposed schedule will work with their freight movements in the corridor and what, if any, capital improvements would be required to add service. We anticipate that NS will need 10-12 months to complete the study.

Please note that the completion of the study will provide the Department with a better idea of the financial commitment that will be required in order to fund an additional round trip a day.

The addition of baggage cars to the Pennsylvanian Amtrak Service, which will accommodate bicycles

The Pennsylvanian Amtrak Service currently operates without a baggage car. While the elimination of the baggage car originally was a cost savings measure for Amtrak, and ultimately PennDOT in the payment of subsidy, the Department has recently negotiated the return of a baggage car to the Pennsylvanian Service. The baggage car allows for not only for better management of customer bags for intercity travel, but also allows for the transportation of full size bicycles, without the requirement of a Bike Box. The Department is still working through the details associated with the “checking of a bike,” such as price and available spots in the baggage car, but we hope to have the service available at the beginning of the new federal fiscal year, starting October 1.

You will notice a theme with these desires for expanded services and amenities. They all require investment. Funding to conduct studies, to build infrastructure, and funding to maintain and operate. And this is a challenging time in Pennsylvania’s transportation funding overall, including multimodal resources.

Act 44 of 2007 requires the Turnpike to pay PennDOT \$450 million annually for highways, bridges, and public transit. Act 89 of 2013 modified the payments to dedicate the full amount to public transit. In 2022, Turnpike payments to PennDOT will be reduced to \$50 million. Right

now, the Department cannot meet all of the desired services or expansions that the Committee's constituents want, and if the law is adjusted to remove funding to fill that gap, we will have significant additional issues.

Additionally, federal law made PennDOT responsible for operating costs for Amtrak's Keystone and Pennsylvanian services, which runs \$16 million to \$20 million a year. Half of these operating costs are funded through Act 44.

We have been focused on rail service today, but I want to remind the Committee that public transportation is available in some form in every county in Pennsylvania. Forty-nine counties have fixed route service somewhere in the county while all 67 counties have shared-ride service delivered by 44 providers.

The state supported nearly 400 million transit trips in the 2017-18 state fiscal year. These services are critical in communities across the state. To illustrate, I wanted to share some information from the last two years of our Act 44-mandated performance reviews of fixed-route services. The reviews include a customer-survey portion, and on average, 62 percent of the people who use these services said that they have no alternate means of transportation.

We need a long-term, sustainable funding solution for transit, and we will continue to work with stakeholders and you, our legislators, to identify long-term funding strategies to maintain these critical services while supporting economic growth. The Wolf administration believes strongly that mass transit is a vital part of all our communities and our economy and it is essential that we continue making strong investments in it.

Thank you for the opportunity to present before the Committee today. I welcome any questions the committee has for me at this time.