

Will Congress Help Bush Kill Passenger Rail?

by Mary Jane Freeman

At the very moment that the United States desperately needs to rebuild its collapsing economic infrastructure, a policy war is raging over whether to shut down our national passenger rail service, Amtrak.

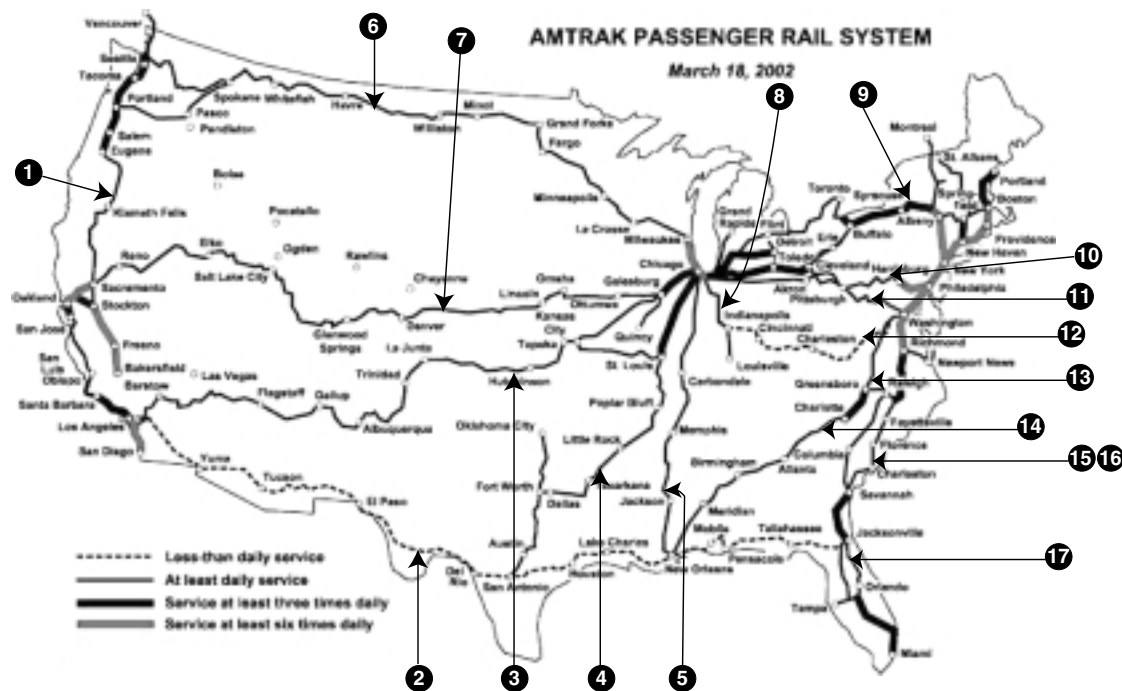
On June 15, a Congressional subcommittee vote slashed Amtrak funding for Fiscal 2006 to \$550 million—a 55% cut

from its current, completely inadequate level of \$1.2 billion. As these maps graphically demonstrate, this slashed funding is, *de facto*, the zero budget for Amtrak which President Bush demanded.

The free-enterprise agenda to bankrupt and privatize Amtrak, pushed since the days of Newt Gingrich’s “Amtrak Reform Council,” is the core of Bush’s plan for passenger rail. Joseph Vranich, a former Gingrich Council member, praised the vote as “a step in the right direction,” and called for “ending Amtrak’s gravy train.”

The subcommittee action flagrantly disregarded the April 27 voice-vote approval by the full House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, of H.R. 1630, calling for Amtrak funding of \$2 billion per year over six years. H.R. 1630, with 79 co-sponsors from both parties, awaits a vote by the full House. The subcommittee vote also ignores city council reso-

FIGURE 1
Amtrak in 2002, Already Slashed Since 1980



Sources: National Association of Railroad Passengers; EIR, 2005.

Major Routes To Be Shut Down

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Coast Starlight: Seattle to Los Angeles. 2. Sunset Limited: Orlando to Los Angeles. 3. Southwest Chief: Chicago to Los Angeles. 4. Texas Eagle: Chicago to Los Angeles. 5. City of New Orleans: Chicago to New Orleans. 6. Empire Builder: Chicago to Seattle or Portland. 7. California Zephyr: Chicago to Oakland. 8. Hoosier State: Chicago to Indianapolis. 9. Lake Shore Limited: New York to Chicago. 10. Three Rivers: New York to Chicago. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Capitol Limited: Washington, D.C. to Chicago. 12. Cardinal: Washington, D.C. to Chicago. 13. Carolinian: New York to Charlotte. 14. Crescent: New York to New Orleans. 15, 16. Palmetto & Silver Service: New York to Miami. 17. Auto Train: Passenger/vehicle non-stop train from Lorton, Virginia to Florida. |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Source: House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Minority, June 15, 2005.

lutions calling for retooling threatened GM and Ford auto plants to build components for a national rail system.

But on June 21, when the full House Appropriations Committee took up the subcommittee's June 15 transportation bill, it passed "as is," rejecting Rep. John Olver's (D-Mass.) amendment to restore Amtrak funding to \$1.2 billion. The final bill, with its death-cuts, now goes to the full House for debate and a vote.

At a June 13 "Save Amtrak" rally held at Baltimore's Penn Station and attended by nearly 100 labor leaders and citizens and five members of Congress, Ed Wytkind, president of the Transportation Trades Department of the AFL-CIO, told the crowd "the truth about the Bush Amtrak plan: Force Amtrak into bankruptcy liquidation; allow profit-driven speculators to cherry-pick Amtrak's dismembered parts; dump the costs on the states; throw thousands of workers on the unemployment lines; and strand millions of Amtrak passengers. That's the vision of this White House."

At the rally, members of Congress insisted that saving Amtrak is a national security matter; on 9/11, for example, all air travel stopped. It is also a matter of sanity: Americans spend 3.5 billion hours a year in traffic, consuming high-priced polluting oil.

31 States Without Trains

The effect of the subcommittee and Appropriations Committee votes is to adopt Bush's Amtrak-killing posture. As Amtrak CEO David Gunn put it, "The practical impact of \$550 million in Federal support would be the same as zero funding, and they know it." Amtrak seeks \$1.8 billion, and even Bush's Department of Transportation Inspector General testified that a *minimum* of \$1.5 billion is required to ensure safe trains.

But subcommittee chair Rep. Joseph Knollenberg (R-Mich.) flippantly claimed that the \$550 million isn't a shutdown plan, because state and local governments can pay to keep routes if they want them—an absurd assertion. Already, as a result of tight state budgets in Michigan and Illinois, three state-subsidized routes—the Blue Water, Pere Marquette, and Hiawatha—are threatened with shutdown.

Olver, the ranking Democrat on the subcommittee, warned, "We are closer to a shutdown of Amtrak than before."

FIGURE 2

Amtrak in 2006, If Bush/GOP Budget Is Passed



Source: www.amtrak.com.

Thirty-one states will "lose all passenger rail service completely," with this funding level (see **Figures 1 and 2**), and it doesn't cover the "labor costs [from] layoffs and contract abrogation" associated with terminating the long-distance routes. Nor would Amtrak's debt service or railroad pension obligations be met.

"House Republican Appropriators Would Shut Down Amtrak," headlined the press release from Rep. James Oberstar (D-Minn.), denouncing the subcommittee vote. "We would no longer have a national intercity passenger rail system." All "the nation's long-distance passenger train routes . . . stand to be eliminated," he wrote.

Congressman David Obey (D-Wisc.) rejected the GOP premise that any route with \$30 or more per passenger in subsidies must be axed. "If we allowed the same logic" for highways, "there would be virtually no interstate highways in rural areas." This is a "disservice, to freeze out [regions] because they are sparsely populated," Obey said. "We're going to rue the day" that this is done. He added that "the President precipitated a crisis" with Amtrak's creditors, and said the vote will add to the volatility of the debt they hold.

Economist and Democratic leader Lyndon LaRouche has emphasized that now is the time, not to destroy our rail system, but to build high-speed passenger and freight rail service to transform the industrial heartland and the national economy. Federal action is urgent to save the auto sector's machine-tool capacity and skilled workforce to do this, and to rescue Amtrak.