

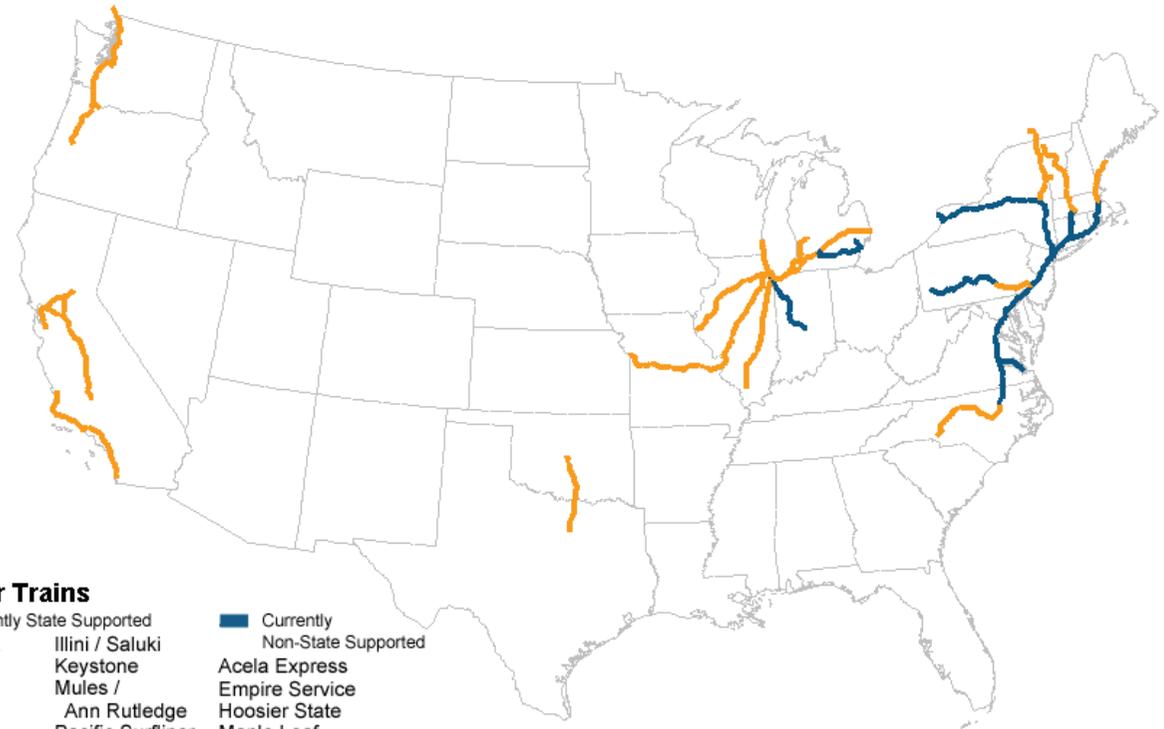
# Rewarding State Investment in Intercity Rail

By Rich Sampson

In the past several years, the Obama Administration has attempted to jump-start the nation's high-speed program and significantly expand the intercity passenger rail network. Initially, this effort focused on a truly national scope to new and upgraded passenger rail services. Investment – through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009, along with subsequent annual appropriations – was directed support to projects from coast to coast, with varying degrees of scope, cost and intention. In his 2010 State of the Union Address, President Obama declared that the initiative would connect 80 percent of the nation's population through high-speed or upgraded passenger rail routes.

In recent months, however, a number of high-profile high-speed and intercity rail projects were abandoned by state leaders opposed to the projects' relative costs. Governors in Florida, New Jersey, Ohio and Wisconsin turn down already-secured federal investment for their states. The political atmosphere surrounding each of these decisions attracted front-page media coverage and shifted passenger rail issues to the forefront of national discourse. Regardless of the underlying motivations and opposing philosophies involved in each case, it became obvious certain states and regions had far less an appetite for high-speed and intercity passenger rail than others.

Not surprisingly, the states and regions most



## Corridor Trains

<span style="color: orange;">■</span> Currently State Supported	<span style="color: blue;">■</span> Currently Non-State Supported
Adirondack	Illini / Saluki
Blue Water	Keystone
Capitols	Mules /
Carolinian	Ann Rutledge
Cascades	Pacific Surfliner
Downeaster	Pere Marquette
Ethan Allen	Piedmont
Heartland Flyer	San Joaquins
Hiawathas	Lincoln Service
Illinois Zephyr / Carl Sandburg	Vermont
	Acela Express
	Empire Service
	Hoosier State
	Maple Leaf
	Pennsylvanian
	Regional
	Wolverine

Amtrak's corridor routes are largely supported by state investment, especially outside the Northeast. Several states have long histories of investment in corridor routes, while others are more recent entrants.

interested in advancing new projects were usually the ones who had already demonstrated their belief in the effectiveness of intercity passenger rail by investing in state-supported routes. Throughout its more than a decade of coverage

of North America's passenger rail industry, *RAIL Magazine* has highlighted many of these state-led initiatives and argued that their blend of higher train frequencies, improved reliability, new and updated equipment, intermodal connections and

Train	Established	State(s)	Number of Trips (Roundtrip)	Ridership (Annual)	Number of Stations	RAIL Profile
<i>Adirondack</i>	1974	NY, QC	1	118,673	19	
<i>Blue Water</i>	1974	MI, IL	1	157,709	11	
<i>Capitol Corridor</i>	1991	CA	32	1,580,619	16	11
<i>Carolinian</i>	1984	NC, VA, DC, MD, DE, PA, NJ, NY	1	308,197	24	6
<i>Cascades</i>	1993	BC, WA, OR	6	836,499	18	2
<i>Downeaster</i>	2001	ME, NH, MA	5	500,000	10	8
<i>Ethan Allen Express</i>	1996	VT, NY	1	48,031	13	
<i>Heartland Flyer</i>	1999	OK, TX	1	81,749	7	
<i>Hiawatha</i>	1971	WI, IL	14	783,060	5	
<i>Illinois Service</i>	1971	IL, MO	8	1,046,824	31	18
<i>Keystone Service</i>	1971	NY, NJ, PA	14	1,296,838	21	7
<i>Missouri Service</i>	1980	MO	3	172,554	10	
<i>Pacific Surfliner</i>	2000	CA	14	2,613,604	27	3
<i>Pere Marquette</i>	1984	MI, IL	1	101,907	5	
<i>Piedmont</i>	1995	NC	2	99,873	9	8
<i>San Joaquin</i>	1974	CA	6	977,834	18	11
<i>Vermont</i>	1995	VT, MA, CT, NY, NJ, PA, DE, MD, DC	1	86,245	30	
<i>Virginia Service</i>	2009	VA, DC, MD, PA, DC, NJ, NY	2	126,072	17	
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>10,936,288</b>	<b>291</b>	<b>N/A</b>

<i>Chicago-Iowa City</i>	2013	IL, IA	2	246,800	8	N/A
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rail-oriented development were the most cost-effective and responsive strategies to bolster the nation's intercity rail network. We remain committed to that vision, and will profile some of the recent developments in state-supported intercity routes and how those efforts can serve as models for a broader vision.

### State of the States

Various states have had a growing, but differing approach to their involvement in the nation's intercity passenger rail network since Amtrak's inception in 1971. Initially, Amtrak assumed

responsibility in both financing and operating the totality of the system, and inaugurated a coast-to-coast network, primarily focusing on the long-distance trains it inherited from the privately-owned railroads. The Northeast Corridor remained the most striking exception to this approach, where Amtrak continued the tradition of the Pennsylvania and New Haven railroads in providing frequent service along the nation's most densely-populated corridor. Amtrak operated other corridor routes in Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia less frequently without the requirement of corresponding state investment.

Gradually, states began to desire more focused service between their communities than Amtrak was willing or able to provide.

Just a few years after Amtrak's creation, a trio of states stepped forward with their own investment to restore trains previously operated by the private railroads that had not been retained by the national rail service. In 1974, California moved to return trains to the San Joaquin Valley and launched a route with that name connecting terminals in Oakland and Sacramento with Bakersfield. At the same time, Michigan sought to bring back its east-west line between Port Huron and Chicago, ultimately to be known as the *Blue*

*Water*. Likewise, New York longed for its link between its namesake city and Montreal and established the *Adirondack*. This set of state-supported trains set a pattern for their peers to emulate.

While the 1980s were largely quiet for expansion of state-supported service – aside from North Carolina’s creation of the *Carolinian* and Michigan’s *Pere Marquette*, both in 1984 – the 1990s and 2000s saw a steady ramp-up of state and regional corridor routes. California – already accustomed to the state-funded train process with the *San Joaquin* – added two new routes, the *Capitol Corridor* and *Pacific Surfliner*. Today, they are Amtrak’s busiest routes outside the Northeast Corridor (*for more information on California’s extensive intercity rail network, see RAIL #11 – ed*).

Vermont took the lead in New England, debuting the *Vermont* in 1995 between St. Albans and Washington, D.C. – via the Northeast Corridor – and the *Ethan Allen Express* between Rutland and New York City the following year. Five years later, Maine followed suit, initiating the *Downeaster* between Portland and Boston. It has since become one of Amtrak’s fastest-growing lines since its 2001 opening (*for more information on Amtrak’s Downeaster, see RAIL #8 – ed*).

One of the most significant developments in the corridor-based approach to intercity passenger rail came not with the single *Cascades* train between Seattle, Wash., Portland and Eugene, Ore. started in 1993, but the substantial enhancement of the service by the joint work of the Washington and Oregon governments later that decade, which brought new Talgo equipment, increased frequencies and improved performance to the route, as well as an expansion to Vancouver, B.C. (*for more information on Amtrak’s Cascades corridor, see RAIL #2 – ed*). More than any other state or regionally-based corridor, the upgrade of the *Cascades* operation signaled a new path for innova-



Amtrak’s *Pacific Surfliner* – seen here passing south through Burbank, Calif. – carries the most passengers of any route outside the Northeast Corridor and is reflective of California’s extensive commitment to vibrant intercity rail corridors.

tive corridor projects.

In the late ‘90s, California boosted frequencies on all three of its routes and deployed new bi-level passenger coaches. Meanwhile, grassroots support and local leadership in communities in Oklahoma and Texas fueled the genesis of the *Heartland Flyer* between Oklahoma City and Fort Worth in 1999. Likewise, North Carolina advanced an aggressive vision for intercity rail, added additional frequencies and more equipment to its *Carolinian* and *Piedmont* routes in the early 2000s – along with a focused plan to rehabilitate its historic station facilities – while Illinois also scheduled more train trips and a larger fleet of locomotives and railcars in 2006 (*for more information on North Carolina’s intercity vision, see RAIL #6 and for Illinois’ investment in its state routes, see RAIL #18 – ed*). Virginia – which had benefited from relatively frequent service between

Washington, D.C., Richmond and Newport News as an extension of the Northeast Corridor – began support for two new trains in 2009, with an additional train between Newport News and Washington, and another between Washington and Lynchburg, operating along the same route as Amtrak’s existing *Crescent* to Atlanta and New Orleans.

By the end of the new century’s first decade – and not counting the Northeast Corridor – more than 110 daily corridor trips were being provided on 17 different routes, serving more than 290 stations and carrying more than 10.9 million annual riders.

## A More Realistic Vision

It was in this atmosphere of steadily improving progress for state and regional corridor trains that many of the projects initially supported by ARRA

were envisioned. New conventional intercity routes would create service between Milwaukee and Madison, Wisc, and Cleveland and Cincinnati, Ohio, much in the same manner as the *Cascades*, *Downeaster* and *Heartland Flyer* had done earlier with strong results. Moreover, Florida would step into the scene in a big way, with the nation's first true high-speed rail line between Orlando and Tampa, while New Jersey would improve Amtrak and commuter rail operations on the Northeast Corridor with the Access to the Region's Core (ARC) tunnel between New York City and New Jersey.

Despite the promise contained in these respective projects, none of the states in which they would be located had contributed much to corridor-based intercity rail service – although they did all benefit from Amtrak's long-distance trains passing through their states, and Wisconsin had provided support for the short *Hiawatha* route between Milwaukee and Chicago. Perhaps it should have not come as a great surprise to passenger rail observers when, categorically, those states were not willing to support new corridor operations, especially in some of the most challenging fiscal environments at the state level in the nation's history. A culture of familiarity with how state and regional corridors could serve as conduits to mobility had not been sufficiently fostered, and, accordingly, the new projects could not find a foothold.

Aware of this reality, much of the investment originally targeted for those projects has been distributed, largely in the direction of states and regions previously engaged in improving their local corridors. The biggest beneficiary has been California, which – in addition to improving their existing trio of corridors with new equipment, infrastructure and train frequencies – will now work to construct the nation's first comprehensive high-speed rail network, whisking passengers between the downtowns of San Francisco and Los Angeles in two and a half hours at speeds up to 220 mph by 2018 (additional spurs will reach Sacramento and San Diego).

Illinois will increase both speed and frequency on its route between Chicago and St. Louis by 2014, with trains operating up to 110 mph and reducing the trip from five and a half hours to four. Governor Pat Quinn and other state elected officials have also signaled their desire to invest in 220 mph high-speed service on the same corridor. The lone new entrant into the corridor approach will be a new route between Chicago and Iowa City, Iowa, passing through the Quad Cities region between Illinois and Iowa en route. While Illinois has remained firmly committed to the new service and bringing its corridor route count to four, Iowa leaders only recently gave final approval for the project to move forward. Meanwhile, Maine will extend the reach of the *Downeaster* to the north and east to Freeport and Brunswick later this year, and Virginia is constructing a new station in Norfolk, which will host a number of extended trips from their current terminus in Richmond.

Beyond the creation of new routes, projects supported by ARRA and other sources will expand the performance of existing corridors. The *Cascades* service will benefit from new passing sidings, trackbed improvements and signaling technology that will

not only raise speeds and increase reliability, but also allow for the addition of new frequencies – supported by new rolling stock. North Carolina and Virginia also moving forward with similar measures to upgrade their railroad infrastructure, improving schedules and reliability on Amtrak trains throughout the Southeast. More incremental improvements will also take place in the Northeastern states of Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania and Vermont, as well as in the Midwest in Michigan and Wisconsin.

### Incentivizing Improvement

The story of America's gradual return to intercity passenger rail solutions is one told through both strong achievements and discouraging setbacks, but its overall direction is one of progress. It has become clear that intercity passenger rail will not reach all parts of the nation at the same time and in the same way. Some states and regions – California, Illinois, the Pacific Northwest, North Carolina and Virginia, and others – are eager to embrace the benefits frequent, reliable and effective rail service can offer. Others are not quite as ready to move forward with similar projects and should not be pushed to do so when their intentions are otherwise.

Rather, federal investment should serve as an incentive to action for states and regions where a vision for how intercity – and, eventually, high-speed – passenger rail will serve their communities, which reflects a permanent commitment that can overcome changes in political leadership. Those states that have demonstrated such resolve over years and decades should get the first bite at the apple, as new improvements feed on the others which preceded them and completed models emerge from which later projects can replicate and modify as real-world examples.

As high-speed and intercity passenger rail projects move from plans to reality, and demonstrate their ability to act as catalysts to mobility, economic development and community vitality, it won't be long before previously hesitant leaders seek to become part of the movement. 

The new Virginia-supported service between Lynchburg and Washington, D.C. is Amtrak's fastest-growing route, and besting ridership projections by substantial numbers.



Click on the images below to watch YouTube videos of a) a cab ride on California's Pacific Surfliner; b) Washington and Oregon's Cascades departing Portland; c) North Carolina's Piedmont; and d) the Heartland Flyer, connecting Oklahoma and Texas.

