

# Amtrak California Rail Map

By Rich Sampson

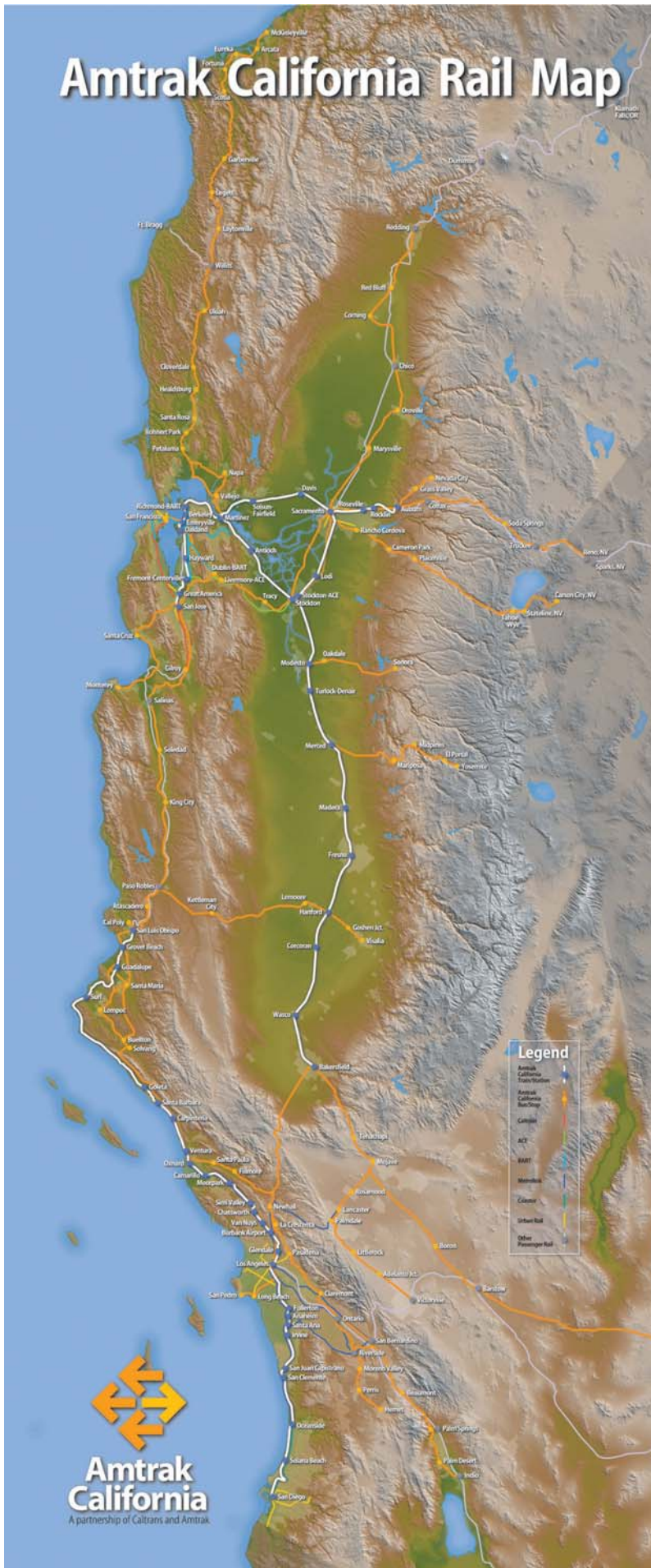
**“What’s the future of passenger rail in the United States?”** An oft-asked question to which the answer today is: “Look West.”

Relieving congestion, offering alternative travel modes, improving air quality, maximizing land use and value and mobilizing the largest state in the United States and the world’s sixth largest economy. Welcome to California and the future of state-led passenger rail. Through the confluence of three robust and growing passenger rail routes, the Golden State is proving that transportation benefits like these can be addressed successfully through vision, innovation and meeting community needs.

More than 30 roundtrip trains operate daily over the trio of California’s State-supported intercity passenger rail lines. Individually, those routes are known as the Capitol Corridor, Pacific Surfliner, and San Joaquins, but collectively, they’re staking out a reputation as the model for state leadership in passenger rail service, and they herald the most significant partnership in passenger rail today: that of California, Amtrak, the cities and communities served and the passengers.

## California Changes Its View

While California’s current intercity passenger rail momentum is remarkable, like most of the country, passenger rail in California experienced a downfall in the second half of the 20th century. When Amtrak assumed responsibility for all of the nation’s intercity passenger trains in 1971, California saw no more than a handful of daily scheduled trains across the most populous state in the United States. Only a trickle of runs plied what is now the Pacific Surfliner route, while the San Joaquins line hosted one daily run and the Capitol Corridor only saw long-distance trains from out of the state. It was a significant departure from the State’s rail heydays when trains of the Union, Central and Southern Pacific Railroads linked California’s grand cities



At a time when the national debate surrounding intercity passenger rail and Amtrak has intensified, *RAIL Magazine* profiles the vibrant rail network prospering across California.

# California's RAILROAD

and agricultural towns with hundreds of trains each day. They also fueled the transformation of the State from the nation's frontier to one of its most powerful economic, cultural and social engines.

This lull in California's passenger rail service would not last long, however, as the State Department of Rail, part of the Department of Transportation provided its first investment in intra-state trains in 1976. With

the state's extensive highway system becoming increasingly burdened by congestion, and its airports packed with local, domestic and international flights, Department of Transportation officials recognized that improved passenger rail services, the first true mobilizer of the state's prosperity, could provide an opportunity to effectively move its residents within California. This ushered in a new view of passenger rail – that state initia-

Coming and going: California's intercity rail services have steadily increased frequency and ridership.



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tive would be the prime mover in rail revitalization.

California began investing in its passenger rail network with the mere addition of a single daily roundtrip on the route between Los Angeles and San Diego, which at the time hosted three daily trains supported by Amtrak. While numerically small, the move bore much larger symbolic significance. Those three existing runs were holdovers from the halcyon days of the private railroads' grand operations in California, whose primary function was to shuttle Southern California residents to the long-distance trains operating out of Los Angeles' Union Station. With this additional daily run, the state established an expanded and modern structure for passenger rail service: to move passengers within a state on important travel corridors.

#### **The Surfliner**

Winding along the Pacific coast for 129 miles between the downtowns of Los Angeles and San Diego, the rail line between the two Southern California cities is embedded in the transportation history of the region. The Atchison, Topeka & the Santa Fe Railroad first laid-down the route in 1874, and had offered multiple trips each day along its beach-combing expedition, whose trains were known until 1995 as the *San Diegans*. While its daily trips dwindled as passenger rail struggled through its transition in the 1970s, the line would play host to the one of the most dramatic surges in passenger rail travel since the industrial revolution.

Beginning with the first trip supported by Caltrans in 1976, the corridor undertook a true resurgence in popularity and activity. Passengers rushed to the new trains so speedily that by end of the decade, the number of *San Diegans* runs had more than doubled from 1975. By 1980, all seven daily trips continued to be operated by Amtrak. To the Department of Rail, the efforts suggested their new vision for intercity passenger service in the state was one well-rooted in

reality.

Warren Weber, the director of the Department of Rail through 2004 and now retired, says that "the Los Angeles – San Diego route was a natural venue for improved service based on its prospects for strong ridership and potential for expansion."

Progress on growing the route continued in 1988, when the service was extended north of Los Angeles to Santa Barbara to link the busy suburban communities in the metropolitan region. An additional two trips were added to the northern segment by 1995, when the route again pushed north to San Luis Obispo. It was then when the revitalization of the *San Diegans* corridor hit its stride. With trains then traversing a line of 351 miles between San Luis Obispo through Los Angeles to San Diego, the longstanding *San Diegans* moniker became outdated. That same year, the Department of Rail, in coordination with Amtrak, initiated an effort to match the phenomenal frequency of trips on the line with an equal level of service quality. First among these improvements was a rebranding of the corridor's trains as the Pacific Surfliner, to more accurately reflect the full nature of the route. The name change was only the most superficial difference. A call went out in 1997 to railcar manufacturers for new trainsets not only to carry more passengers, but also to improve the ride experience to truly make the service a preferable travel option. By the time Alstom began delivering the new bi-level coaches in 1999, upgrades in track, train scheduling and dispatching, stations and marketing were under implementation to compliment the new equipment. Now offering at least 11 roundtrips every day, more than 2 million passengers ride the Pacific Surfliner each year, earning it the distinction of the second-highest ridership in the Amtrak system, after the Northeast Corridor between Boston and Washington.

In its thorough enhancement of the service that's now emerged as the Pacific Surfliner, California has established itself a modern and vibrant

intercity passenger rail route. From its initial bold decision to add a single train to new equipment and stations, the Surfliner speaks to passenger rail success grounded in the possible.

Warren Weber notes that “the success of what is now the Surfliner Route quickly translated into efforts to do more for passenger rail service in other areas of the state.”

### The San Joaquins

While the Pacific Surfliner route emerged from a venerable passenger rail foundation, its counterpart operating through the physical heart of the state found a more tenuous path to salvation. Stretching 363 miles between Oakland and Bakersfield through the fertile San Joaquin Valley region, trains which bear the valley’s name ran through the heavily agricultural area since the railroads first arrived in California. Linking Bakersfield, and moderately-sized cities like Fresno, Modesto and Stockton with the Bay Area, the rail routes operated by the Southern Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka & the Santa Fe became lifelines through the 19th and 20th centuries for the Valley to move both crops and people. However, when private railroads divested themselves of passenger operations to Amtrak control in 1971, the towns and cities along the route were left without service, as Amtrak’s initial north-south route in California ran along the Pacific coast between Los Angeles and Oakland.

Saddled with the loss of the passenger trains that played such a fundamental role in building their Valley communities, the public began pressuring Amtrak to restore the route immediately after

it was discontinued with Amtrak’s commencement. Through additional funding provided by Congress, in 1974 the national passenger operator designed and initiated a new hybrid San Joaquin corridor of the former Southern Pacific and Santa Fe lines from Oakland to Bakersfield. However, almost as soon as it returned, the San Joaquin was again threatened with abolishment in 1979, as Amtrak proposed a nationwide reduction of service. As it was already observing promising returns from its investment three years earlier in the Los Angeles – San Diego route, the State Department of Transportation stepped in and began support for the continued operation of the daily San Joaquin service.

Jim Sperring, the mayor of Suisun City in Solano County, calls the San Joaquins “a vital link between Northern and Southern California,” and attributes the route’s success in attracting riders to the fact that “people are looking for alternatives to driving.”

Warren Weber agrees, saying that “the San Joaquins was built by rejuvenating a previously disorganized and threatened rail route into a corridor more appealing for riders.”

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In San Jose, Amtrak and local commuter rail service connect.





In Richmond, Calif., Amtrak riders can connect to BART services.

Applying the model of increasing local service in passenger rail corridors, the Department went right to work by adding a second daily roundtrip in February of 1980. As the corridor was more moderately sized than its southern counterpart, continued frequency growth for the San Joaquin occurred on a more moderate pace, with additions of a daily roundtrip in December 1989, and again in October 1992, to bring the total of daily trips on the route to four.

Coinciding with the ramping-up of the Capitol Corridor service in 1999 between San Jose and Sacramento, a new leg to California's capitol city was added to the San Joaquin route that same year. Branching of the existing route at Stockton over Union Pacific tracks, the expanded service formed a Y-shaped corridor fanning out through the heart of the state. The route now hosts four daily roundtrips between Oakland and Bakersfield and another two between Sacramento and Bakersfield.

The steady improvement and expansion of the San Joaquin corridor has brought with it equally solid results in ridership and operations. Throughout the period of State-sup-

ported service, since 1979 ridership has consistently grown, from around 120,000 passengers who took the single daily trip that first year, to nearly 770,000 in 2003. Meanwhile, on-time performance of the trains steadily improved, through establishing good service habits and improved relationships with the host freight railroads, Union Pacific and Burlington Northern Santa Fe.

### The Capitols

Resting within a crescent-shaped region along northern California's Bay area is the Golden State's second most densely populated areas. Stretching east to west, the cities of Sacramento, Berkeley, Oakland, San Francisco and San Jose form a vibrant band of residential, commercial, technological and governmental activity, tied together by smaller cities and suburban locales along the way. Yet, in spite of all these dynamics, the region saw only sparse intercity passenger rail service in the latter half of the 20th century. Between 1971 and 1991, Amtrak trains were limited to long-distance routes coming from or going to distant places out of the

state, like Chicago or Seattle.

After nearly two decades of traffic congestion and limited opportunities for intra-regional travel, and with the state's growing confidence in passenger rail investment, leadership by State and local officials spurred action to deliver the area a modern passenger rail operation to overcome these challenges. In 1988, the California State Assembly passed a resolution directing the Department of Rail and local transportation agencies to study a new service between Auburn, east of Sacramento, and San Jose. Two years later, the group returned with the final report, calling for three daily roundtrips over the line. Based on those recommendations, the Department of Transportation worked with Amtrak to design the service, and on December 12, 1991, the Capitol Corridor opened for business.

As the service had been designed by state and local leaders, those players maintained a strong role in continuing and improving the Corridor trains. The policy committee formed to conduct the study remained intact once service was initiated and began devising a strategy to ensure their fledgling regional operation was a long-term success. After adding an additional daily trip to the route in 1996, the committee recommended a new framework for the future of the Capitol Corridor: a joint powers authority to be responsible for management of the corridor. Based on legislative structures within the California state government, local consortia were authorized to assume activities for public services by executing an interagency transfer agreement with the State. Taking advantage of that opportunity, the Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Authority became effective on July 1, 1998. The Authority is comprised of representatives from the Bay Area Rapid Transit Authority, the Sacramento Regional Transit District, the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority, Yolo County Transportation District, Solano Transportation Authority and the Placer County Transportation Planning Agency. To allow for day-to-day operation of the

Joint Powers Authority, administration is contracted to Bay Area Rapid Transit personnel.

“The Joint Powers Authority really worked well because it allows the service to be fueled by local agencies and provides a sense of ownership,” says Eugene K. Skoropowski, the managing director of Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Authority. He adds that although it is a “complex series of relationships, we operate a responsible, efficient and growing service.”

The newly created body went straight to work, delving into implementing existing plans for service expansion. Working closely with the track owner Union Pacific, the members and staff of the Authority arranged for additional trips to be added while providing compensation of additional funding and infrastructure improvement projects along the line. As a result, a fifth roundtrip between Oakland and Sacramento was added to the schedule in October 1998 and quickly followed by another in February 1999. By 2003, 12 roundtrips between Oakland and Sacramento were offered on weekdays, with nine of those operating on the weekends, as well as four weekday roundtrips running between Oakland and San Jose, and another two operating only on weekends. Annual ridership now exceeds 1.2 million passengers and has afforded the Corridor the status of Amtrak’s fastest growing route since 1998.

Skoropowski predicts that the through the Capitol Corridor Joint

Powers Authority, the service will “maintain our good relationship with Union Pacific to continue to improve frequency, speed and consistency of operations, and further build this viable and dependable component of the transportation network.”

### Shaping the Success

The results produced by the Pacific Surfliner, San Joaquins and Capitol Corridor were not accomplished in a vacuum. Indeed, the growth and strength of the three routes was achieved through a pragmatic and well-executed strategy, including securing funding, increasing the frequency of trips on each route and delivering riders through a connecting bus network across the State. Each of these aspects played an important role in building California’s passenger rail system.

### No Substitute for Investment

In order to improve intercity passenger rail services in California beyond those operated in Amtrak’s base network, the State would need to provide funding sources to support costs for both operations and capital projects. Fortunately, the State already had an investment stream available in the form of the Public Transportation Account, made possible by the leadership of State Senator Mills and his colleagues. The account’s source of funds stem from portions of taxes on both diesel and

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gasoline throughout the state. Since the first enhancements to the Pacific Surfliner route in 1976, State investment in operations for the intercity rail system has come exclusively from this program. The account is scheduled to receive even more revenue in the coming years, as the State's Traffic Congestion Relief Program statute of 2000 will ultimately direct 20 percent of the gasoline sales tax revenue to the account by 2009.

Dedicating such a large pool of funding to planning and operation of mass transportation services was a key tenant in the State's strategy to achieve its goals such as congestion mitigation and improving travel options.

"The hard work done by Senator Mills and his colleagues in arranging funding was absolutely critical to making these services happen," says Weber, adding that "without those funds, its almost certain we would not be where we are today."

While support for operations of the network has found a stable footing in the Public Transportation Account, investment for capital expenses has been more varied. More than \$2.7 billion in State funds have supported capital projects for upgrades in track, signaling, stations and rolling stock, including the 88 California Cars and 15 F-59 diesel locomotives that make-up the Capitol Corridor and San Joaquin trains.

Investment initially was supplied by special legislation and bond issues from the California State Assembly. More recently, the Traffic Congestion Relief Program, created through legislation in 2000, has provided more than \$200 million for capital projects, while another \$70 million has come from the State's General Fund. Although California has consistently been able to respond to capital needs through these assorted funding streams, a dedicated and stable source of investment for these projects would allow even greater development of the network.

"An ongoing and securing flow of capital investment, either from the State or the federal level would allow

us to add more trips and conduct track and signal work to further improve frequency, speed and reliability," says Warren Weber.

Not only does State funding allow the operation and improvement of rail travel in California, but also presents an opportunity to guide land use and development through its stations. Efforts towards station improvements in Los Angeles, Oakland and San Diego are complemented by their smaller-city counterparts in Bakersfield, Emeryville, Fullerton, Hanford, Richmond and Simi Valley to enhance community livability, transit-oriented development and intermodal connections to local transit services. These projects fuel commercial, residential and civic activities nearby by offering inviting facilities for passengers, easy pedestrian and transit access, and a community resource around which cohesive revitalization can occur.

"Our stations support local and regional efforts to promote transit-oriented development to contribute to efficient and environmentally-superior land use," says Weber of the Department's vision for leveraging station improvements for community growth.

Finally, the fares that growing numbers of Californians are willing to pay to ride the state's intercity trains must not be overlooked. Passengers have become viable partners in this model program.

### **What's the Frequency, California?**

From the first investment in the current Pacific Surfliner route in 1976 to the current bevy of daily trips on all three State-supported lines, one of the most crucial elements in California's intercity passenger rail efforts has been the proliferation in the number of daily trains on each route. As much as having routes that travel through verdant population corridors has built California's success, so has the State's commitment to offering a myriad of train options to train riders. Since the routes serve a traveler clientele that utilize the trains for a multitude of reasons (such as busi-

ness travel and social and recreational journeys) frequent trips on each route are essential to maximize the ability to draw passengers.

Operating more trains, more often has empirically produced robust passenger corridors. Amtrak's Northeast Corridor route, (which links the most densely population region: Boston – New York – Washington) operates a slew of trains on the line, usually offering multiple train options each hour, including the premium Acela Express high-speed trains. The route carries the most riders in the Amtrak network, and also provides the greatest revenue. This framework is being applied to numerous developing passenger rail corridors including the four daily Downeaster trains between Boston and Portland, Maine; to the seven trips on the Hiawatha Line linking Chicago and Milwaukee; and another four roundtrips on the Cascades route in the Pacific Northwest.

Amtrak President David Gunn has underscored the utility of high-frequency service, saying, "if you want the corridor to take off and become vital transportation, you must have frequency, and frequency is more important than speed." He notes that California has become the model in this area, in that "the future, and expansion of both existing corridors and new corridors rests with state-based initiatives ... and you must do what California did."

California's commitment to high frequency service is not only evidenced in the ongoing additions to train schedules, but also in its plans for continued betterment of trips on all three routes. In its State Rail Plan, the Department of Rail outlines goals and strategies to improve both freight and passenger rail options over a decade, covers the period from 2003-2014, and is updated and expanded every two years. The plan includes incremental additions in the number of trains on the Pacific Surfliner, San Joaquins and the Capitol Corridor through 2014. Daily trips on the Surfliner route that year are planned to reach 14 between Los Angeles and San Diego, with

six operating on the Los Angeles to Goleta segment of which three would continue to San Luis Obispo. Further north, the San Joaquin line would see eight trains between Bakersfield and Oakland, with another three serving the Sacramento branch. Finally, 2014 would find 18 roundtrips plying the Capitol Corridor between Oakland and Sacramento, 16 between San Jose and Oakland, 10 linking Sacramento and Roseville and four of those continuing on to Auburn. With these expansions, both the Surfliner and the Capitols would approach near-hourly service during the daytime that is currently found on the Northeast Corridor and mark a significant achievement for short-distance passenger rail corridors in the United States.

Warren Weber says that "high-frequency service is the number 1 priority for California's passenger rail network, as it's the most fundamental need of our riders and that is the most important factor for us."

### **Where the Rubber Meets the Rail**

California's investment in its intercity passenger network is not only represented in its substantial improvements of trips, train equipment, infrastructure or stations, but also in its web of connecting bus routes that feed riders to the three rail lines. Throughout, and even beyond the State, California supports 24 bus routes that link to one or more rail stations. Offering synchronized links to Amtrak California trains, these buses serve major destinations like downtown San Francisco, Napa, and Monterey, small outposts such as Kettleman City and Mojave and connections between two rail stations like the route between Los Angeles and Bakersfield, which is also the system's most-used bus line.

In 2003, nearly 700,000 riders took advantage of the bus services to connect to rail trips and contributed close to \$9 million to support the intercity passenger rail system. These routes are especially important to the Capitol Corridor and San Joaquins trains, with five routes connecting

with the former route's stations and an astonishing 14 linking to stations on the latter line. Moreover, the San Joaquins finds more than half of its riders taking at least one bus for a portion of their trip.

While state investment streams are combined with Amtrak funding sources to support rail operations, connecting bus routes are entirely supported by state funds, and overall cover a large portion of their operating costs. The Department of Transportation contracts with Amtrak to provide the buses, who then subcontracts with bus operators to provide the service. This arrangement allows for all the bus routes, like their rail counterparts, to be integrated into Amtrak's national network for coordinated scheduling, fares and ticketing. For the State and its partners, the connecting bus service is a much needed aspect in not only enhancing the rail network, but also to best mobilize California.

"We've included a strong bus network to strengthen our rail system from the very beginning," says Weber. "We reach 95 percent of California's population via the bus routes and it's a vital aspect of all our train routes, and in particular, the San Joaquins."

### **What's Next?**

While much has been accomplished in California's efforts to revitalize its passenger rail network, still more lies ahead for state and local leaders. At the Department of Rail, in addition to the high priority schedule enhancements, work over the next decade will focus on maintaining the current infrastructure of the system, including the State-owned rolling stock, stations, track segments and marketing program. Moreover, planners will be studying potential new service options throughout the state. The State has convened a separate authority to study a state-wide high-speed rail system, potentially including Magnetic Levitation (Maglev) services as well. Possible conventional rail projects could include an expan-

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*California's Railroad, continued from page 39.*

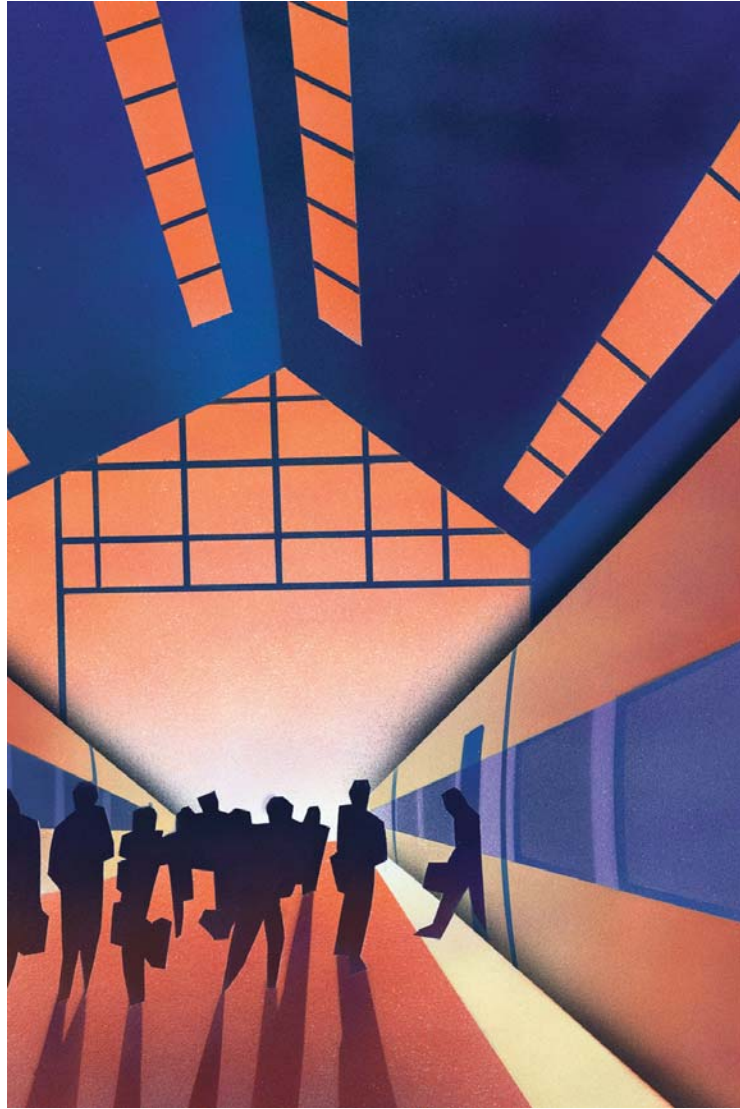
sion of service on the Coast Route between San Francisco and San Luis Obispo, the northern reach of current Surfliner trains, a new route to Monterrey along the Pacific coast south of the Bay Area, a branch off the Pacific Surfliner from Los Angeles through the Coachella Valley to Indio, and expansion of the Capitol Corridor north to Chico and Redding, and to the east to Reno, Nevada. All these projects, including the schedule additions, are dependent on continued and heightened investment from the State's funding sources.

Meanwhile, at the local level, the agencies and partners who have made the trio of routes successful must maintain and elevate their commitment to the services. Ensuring that locally owned stations are maintained and improved will be connected with ongoing efforts at marketing, intermodality, funding support and ridership building. These stakeholders consider their relationships with each other, as well as the State, the vital component in sustaining the momentum for California passenger rail.

"We have accomplished that by bringing together community elected officials, the railroads and California's Department of Rail, to achieve common purposes," said State Senator James Costa. "We know we must approach this incrementally. We know that we are best suited to using proven resources. Those are but two reasons why we have called on Amtrak, the railroads and community officials to ensure our economic growth, our mobility, and individual opportunity."

***Protecting the Partnership***

Additionally, while all players remain supportive and pleased with their relationship with Amtrak, realities of the national rail carrier's status remain an important concern. If fundamental changes are made by federal officials in Amtrak's existence as a railroad, it may have grave consequences for California's State-supported services. While the State's significant investment in support of



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**Nearly 5 million passengers travel on California's State-supported trains each year, and more than 57 million riders have done so since the State's first investment in 1976. No other state can boast as many riders traveling on its intrastate rail lines.**

the routes would likely allow their sustainability in a post-Amtrak funding climate, that framework is dependent on maintaining the underlying structure of intercity passenger rail in the status quo. Provided by the Federal Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970, the federal statute has ensured that Amtrak trains can access freight railroad tracks to operate intercity rail services on a universal basis, rather than negotiating specific arrangements for each individual service or route, as is the case with current commuter rail agreements. These rights were obtained from the freight railroads in exchange for their divestment of all passenger rail operations in 1971 to create Amtrak.

The California State Rail Plan acknowledges this need by stating, “the inclusion of State-supported rail services under the RPSA definition of “intercity” is critical ... for the operation of intercity rail services.”

Thus, the State and its partners will remain vigilant to at least ensure the legal rights to provide the same degree of service as currently offered should Amtrak falter, or as California leaders prefer, the continuation of the current Amtrak operating framework. Ironically, it is California's own model that many Amtrak point to when they advocate a fundamental restructuring of the railroad.

Warren Weber says that “we in California are closely monitoring the federal debate on the future of Amtrak. There are a number of key actions needed to ensure our services should Amtrak no longer exist. States must be able to enjoy many of the exclusive rights Amtrak now enjoys and should then be able to pass those rights on to a franchise operator. Most important is the ability to access private railroad right-of-way at incremental costs and to continue federal oversight so that the shared functions of a rail system can continue.”

#### **Same as it Ever Was ...**

Grounded in a series of courageous and visionary efforts by State and local leaders in California, a

strong intercity passenger rail system has taken root as a vital and growing transportation force in the State. Nearly 5 million passengers travel on California's State-supported trains each year, and more than 57 million riders have done so since the State's first investment in 1976. No other state can boast as many riders traveling on its intrastate rail lines.

One hundred and fifty years ago, it was the railroads that helped populate the Great West. Whenever two iron rails were set down, inevitably, people, towns and eventually cities followed. The California we know today was first made possible by trains.

Today, as seems only natural, it is California that is the forefront of passenger rail's future. The network of trains woven by the *Surfliners*, *San Joaquins* and *Capitols* across the Golden State is a model many states now – or will soon – emulate. And at the heart of this passenger rail success is the partnership between the State, Amtrak and the people of California.

That much is, was, and remains apparent to Warren Weber and his colleagues, as they “seized an opportunity to provide a true multi-modal transportation network, and we've continued to build on our successes,” according to Weber, while also promising that “those efforts will guide the way for the betterment of travel options for California's future.” ■