

Grassroots Group Works To Reinstate Eastern Oregon Passenger Rail Service

by Gail Kimberling
of the Hells Canyon Journal

Between 1977 and 1997, the Amtrak *Pioneer* provided reliable passenger rail service between Portland and Salt Lake City.

Residents and visitors could count on the train, even when inclement weather made vehicle travel unsafe or impossible due to highway closures.

Halfway residents Spring Bartlett, Judith Fisher and Wix Covey all have stories about taking the train to distant destinations for necessity or pleasure.

Bartlett recalled traveling with her two daughters to a family Thanksgiving gathering in Vancouver, Washington in the late 1980s.

“The [Columbia River] Gorge was iced over and really treacherous,” Bartlett said. “We jumped on the train [in Baker City] and the girls had a good time and a great adventure. It wouldn’t have happened without the train.”

Covey and his family were on their way to Provo, Utah for Christmas in the 1980s when their car broke down outside of Baker City in sub-zero weather. They discovered the *Pioneer* was due to arrive shortly so, after finding a place for their car and dog, they climbed aboard the train – complete with presents, boxes of fruit and a Christmas tree.

“By then it was 30 degrees below zero and a blizzard,” Covey said. “Going through Idaho in the middle of the night the snow was blowing parallel to the train but we were nice and comfortable and the kids were asleep. We arrived at 8:30 the next morning and the sun was out and we were well-rested.”

Fisher often took the train to her home town to western Washington instead of making the 10-hour drive by car. Friends and family would also travel by train to Baker City, where Fisher would pick them up for visits.

“It was definitely convenient,” Fisher said. “It was a 13-hour train ride and pleasant and scenic, and I didn’t have to focus on driving the entire time so it was way less stressful.”

Which explains why Fisher, Covey, Bartlett and a handful of other Pine Valley residents have been working to restore the *Pioneer* through an organization called “Panhandle for Passenger Rail,” or P4PR.

Grassroots Effort

The group started their effort in the fall of 2019 after attending a joint meeting with representatives of the Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates (AORTA) and All Aboard Washington in La Grande.

“We came away feeling it was up to communities to do grassroots organizing to let our legislators know we want this,” Bartlett said. “So in early 2020 we wrote a petition and gathered 333 signatures, and then someone in Baker tweaked the petition and they also gathered about 35 signatures in a short period of time.”

The group obtained a resolution in support of returning rail service to eastern Oregon from the Halfway City Council and was next slated to appear before the Baker County Board of Commissioners – and then COVID-19 hit.

“We went dormant for a couple of years,” Bartlett said.

Efforts resumed in earnest last year with passage of President Biden’s Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which included \$66 billion in rail funding to “eliminate the Amtrak maintenance backlog, modernize the Northeast Corridor and bring world-class rail service to areas outside the northeast and mid-Atlantic.”

The bill requires U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg to establish a Corridor Identification and Development Program to facilitate new passenger rail corridors, and the members of Panhandle for Passenger Rail want Baker County to be included.

Susan Bolgiano, a spokes-

person for Panhandle for Passenger Rail, wrote, “The money has been allocated, but who gets it depends on the level of interest shown by the states along the various routes that may be examined. It is up to us in eastern Oregon to make sure our counties and cities along the route get involved and hopefully get passenger rail service.”

P4PR members have written Secretary Buttigieg and federal and state lawmakers urging their support, and they are hoping others will do the same.

Bartlett explained, “We learned people need to write to the entities and elected officials who are eligible to formally submit an expression of interest to the Federal Railroad Administration. That is a requirement to even be considered for the infrastructure bill’s funds. There’s a list of about 25 contacts and we’ve sent out a call to write letters. Judith even wrote a sample letter where personal testimony can be included.”

Members of the group once again approached the Halfway City Council and, once again, the council unanimously agreed to submit a letter in support of reinstating the passenger rail service to eastern Oregon.

They also received support from the mayor and city council in Baker City and positive responses from Senator Lynn Findley (R-Vale) and Representative Mark Owens (R-Crane).

“On March 14 we went to the Pine Eagle School District staff meeting,” Covey said. “Some teachers are interested, and we hope to also get students interested. We want them to know how to do civic engagement; also, this is their future. We’ve been working on this for four years so it’s a long-term deal.”

Many Benefits

Members of P4PR believe passenger rail can support the economy, environment and equity of eastern Oregon.

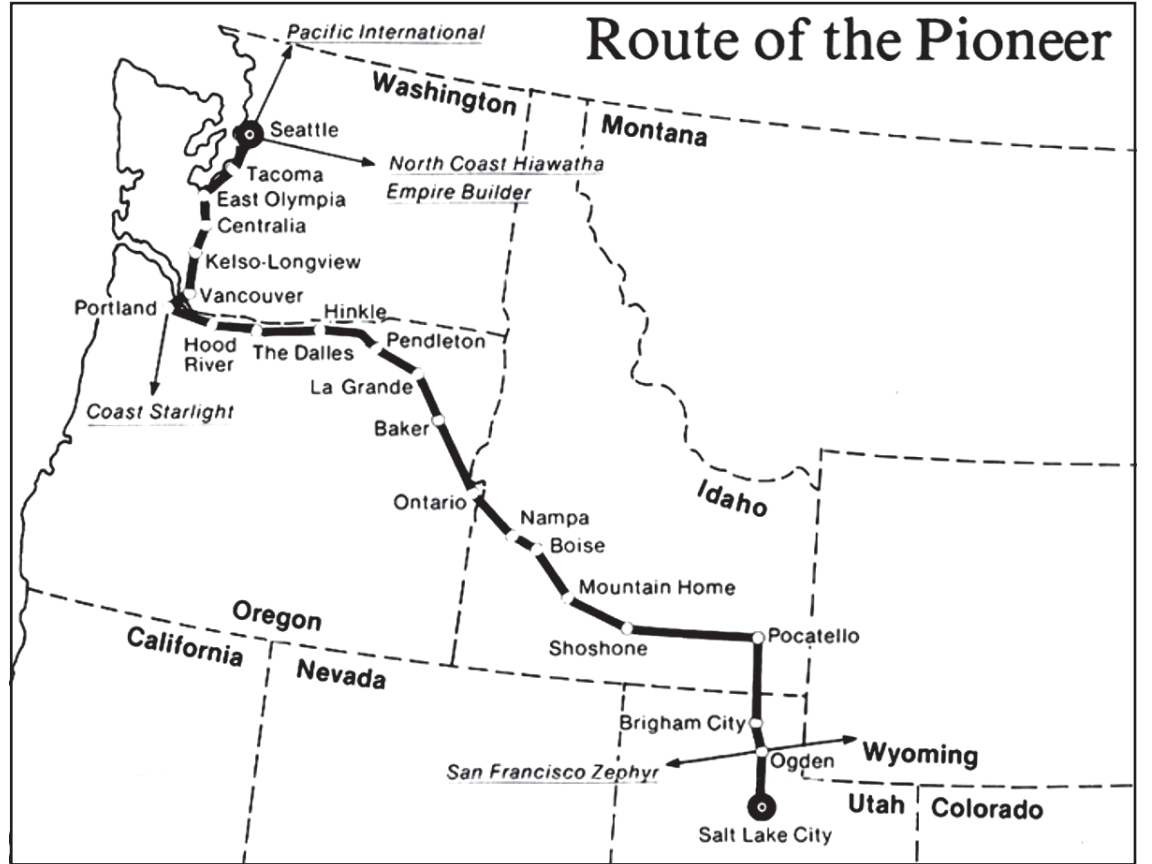
Fisher stated, “Passenger train service between Portland and Salt Lake City would give Baker County residents more access to families, entertainment, medical services, universities and travel, regardless of weather conditions.”

Covey noted a recent study found rail passengers from the Northwest spend on average \$84 per day trip visit and about \$366 per overnight visit, and added, “I’d say that’s about right given what we spend in Pasco when we go there to catch Amtrak, and go pick up our family members who come to visit us yearly from Wisconsin.”

A P4PR press release states, “Trains are significantly more fuel efficient than air travel or cars, and reduces highway congestion and helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions, a recognized issue exacerbating climate change.”

In addition, the group says, “Passenger trains connect communities, rural and urban, enhancing everyone’s quality of life including low-income, tribal and those with disabilities.”

“In areas like eastern Oregon transportation alternatives are very limited,” Bartlett stated. “Some benefits of having a rail option are when the road conditions are hazardous or I-84 is closed, as



ROUTE OF THE PIONEER when it still ran between Portland and Salt Lake City.

well as for youngsters or elders who can’t or are uncomfortable driving. Baker County has an aging demographic, and rail would provide a safe, reliable and affordable option.”

Long and Short

Federal funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal is available through 2026; meanwhile, the 2023 Oregon Legislature’s Joint Committee on Transportation is considering Senate Bill 14, which would require the Department of Transportation to study options for expanding passenger rail service in Oregon (no fiscal impact has yet been determined for the proposal).

The distinction between federal and state dollars is important because eastern Oregon could be served by two kinds of passenger rail: long-distance or intercity trains.

Long-distance trains are operated solely by Amtrak, travel more than 750 miles and typically run once a day.

Intercity, or “corridor” trains, travel less than 750 miles, make regular runs between larger cities and are state-supported.

According to the *Central & Eastern Oregon Station Report* developed by the Oregon Department of Transportation in 2019, “The Amtrak *Pioneer* provided long-distance service to Denver, before continuing with the *California Zephyr* to Chicago. However, according to the last timetable of the Amtrak *Pioneer*, the segment of the route between Portland and Boise is 491 miles; about 410 of the miles between the cities are within Oregon. This distance allows for the possibility of an intercity corridor between Portland and Boise.”

In addition to detailing the history of rail service in central and eastern Oregon, the *Oregon Station Report* includes an in-depth analysis of eight passenger rail stations along the Union Pacific Railroad’s mainline on the route last served by the *Pioneer*: Cascade Locks, Hood River, The Dalles, Hermiston, Pendleton, La Grande, Baker City and Ontario.

The report considered factors such as depot and platform condition, market demands and community characteristics to determine that stations could be re-opened/opened successfully in Troutdale, Hood River, The Dalles, Stanfield, Pendleton, La Grande, Baker City and Ontario.

The report noted the Sumpter Valley Railroad Depot in Baker City “is in peak physical condition” and, aside from platform improvements, “there would be few capital costs in returning the depot to use for passenger rail.”

The report also stated, “The Baker City market via passenger trains would not be critical for the success of either a long-distance or intercity service through eastern Oregon. Despite this conclusion, providing service to the market that does exist in the city would offer benefits to the residents of Baker City and the surrounding county.”

The report ultimately recommends two scenarios for returning passenger rail service to eastern Oregon: Amtrak *Pioneer* reinstatement, a long-distance service that would be federally-funded and operated as a part of Amtrak’s national network; and Portland-Boise Intercity, a service that would only run between Oregon and Idaho and operate in partnership with Oregon Department of Transportation and the Idaho Transportation Department, who would both provide funding.

“While long-distance trains have historically operated along the route in modern history, the *Oregon Station Report* makes the preliminary conclusion that both kinds of service are possibilities for the Oregon segment of the route. This conclusion does not consider factors such as funding, infrastructure requirements and UPRR’s [Union Pacific Railroad’s] willingness and additional requirements to allow for track rights. Further study is needed to analyze all aspects of either scenario,” the report states.

Getting Noticed

Dwindling ridership and operating capital most likely caused the demise of the *Pioneer* route, although exact numbers could not be found by the *Hells Canyon Journal*.

“They were not making enough money from small town rail service and Amtrak shareholders were not happy,” Fisher surmised, adding, “All other transportation systems are subsidized by the government, so why not rail?”

In a letter to Senator Findley, Representative Owens and all Oregon Senators and Representatives, Fisher and Bartlett wrote, “It is important to note that taxpayer subsidy for passenger rail transportation is not a special

case as other modes of transportation involve government subsidy as well, e.g. airports for air travelers and highways for motorists. Rail is a more environmentally friendly transportation option and reduces highway congestion and maintenance costs.”

The P4PR members also brought up a letter submitted by former Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett to the 2019 meeting of train advocacy groups in La Grande, which said, “With the strong potential of Cap and Trade legislation in Oregon, there will be funding streams for alternative transportation vs. autos. Having rail passenger travel from Portland to Boise is a small trade-off that would somewhat give a piece of the fiscal pie to rural [eastern Oregon]. There is interest and support for a pilot project between Boise and Portland, however, it needs to be community-level driven and then the legislative and Congressional folks will pick it up.”

Members of the Panhandle for Passenger Rail group are working hard to turn the tide in this direction and are asking for the public’s help with their efforts.

“Getting this infrastructure money has catalyzed everything... and if gas prices double again we’ll be looking for more mass transit,” Covey said.

Fisher added, “When we went to the AORTA meeting they said it would take a grassroots effort. Our little group is the only one in Oregon doing this, but we’re making a statement and getting noticed.”

“We believe that passenger rail serving eastern Oregon is doable, and a valuable, even essential, addition to our existing transportation mix.”

Interested persons should contact federal and state legislators and ask them to apply for the funding that is now available to reinstate passenger rail service on the old *Pioneer* line by submitting an “expression of interest” to the Federal Corridor Identification and Development Program at: <https://www.regulations.gov/commenton/FRA-2022-0031-0001>.

More information, as well as a complete list of Oregon contacts, templates for letters and resolutions, and the full *Oregon Station Report*, can be found at aortarail.org.

To reach Panhandle for Passenger Rail contact Judith Fisher at 541-519-9329 or Susan Bolgiano at 541-742-4519.

