

Written Testimony of the
Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates (AORTA)
before the
U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
Vancouver, Washington
February 21, 2011

Hon. John Mica, Committee Chair, and Hon. Jaime Herrera Beutler, Committee Member:

AORTA, the Oregon affiliate of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, has for more than 35 years promoted cost-efficient rail travel and freight service in our state and surrounding states, particularly Washington, which shares the Amtrak Cascades Corridor with Oregon.

The **Cascades Corridor** is on the cusp of opportunity to expand passenger service in Oregon and Washington to replicate the successful **Capitol Corridor** in California. That outstanding transportation option serves California travelers from Auburn, in the state's interior, westward through Sacramento and on to Oakland then south to San Jose. The Capitol Corridor's 16 round trips per day move some 1.6 million persons to work and holiday annually in one of the densest regions on the West Coast.

The Capitol Corridor's remarkable ability to serve Californians has been achieved through frequency and reliability of its passenger trains. Frequency and reliability are the key factors. These elements—many trains running on time—are the building blocks of an exemplary rail system.

Frequent, on-time operation in the is key to instituting faster trains—those moving up to 100 mph or possibly 120 mph. On the other hand, ultra-fast passenger trains—traveling over 150 mph—such as the bullet trains of Europe and Asia are not the answer to developing the Cascades Corridor. They may be justified for the **Northeast Corridor**, linking Washington, D.C., New York and Boston. Here, in Oregon and Washington, the people require transport solutions now—incremental solutions that fit current economic conditions.

The answer to the growing demand for better public transport in our nation and along congestion-clogged Interstate 5, paralleling the Cascades rail corridor in Oregon and Washington, is the development of trains that move people frequently and reliably—that come and go when you need them—not few trains at blinding speeds.

With this in mind, **AORTA** appeals to the **U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee** to embrace cost-effective, incremental development of the Cascades Corridor, which operates from the great university town of Eugene, Oregon; northward through the capital city of Salem; and on to the state's business and creative heart, Portland; across the Columbia River to her vital next-door neighbor, Vancouver, Washington; then to that state's commercial powerhouse, Seattle; and to its splendid international northern terminal, Vancouver, B.C.

Improving passenger service between these significant Pacific Northwest cities is essential to solve the growing demands of travelers here, who increasingly fully book the four round trips per day on key sections of the Amtrak Cascades route. The facts speak for themselves: Ridership on Amtrak Cascades finished 2010 with a 16-year high of 838,251 passengers. Total annual ridership exceeded 2009 by 76,641 for a 10 percent increase. The final ridership total capped a year of record heights during which 8 of the 12 months set new benchmarks. Incremental development here has a proven record of success.

The Cascades trains were full then and they are typically full now, as can easily be tested by trying to obtain a ticket without booking well in advance. Further, passenger demand is expected to spike again as freeway congestion and fuel prices rise. The expectation is that demand for passenger rail travel will remain high and will argue for more trains on the Cascades Corridor.

Portland State University experts have **forecast a total population of 2,369,578 in 2015 for the Portland/Vancouver region**. Population densities along the Cascades Corridor demand more and better passenger train service. More frequent, reliable trains will draw travelers in greater numbers out of their gas-gulping vehicles and off I-5. As the population-intense Capitol Corridor proved in California: Build it, and they do come.

Rail development is a bargain compared to highway construction. The **cost effectiveness of steel wheels on steel rails** screams true when honest number crunchers factor in to their calculations the enormous subsidy the federal government pours into the interstate highway system along with the supports that artificially drive down the price of gasoline and diesel in the United States. (See Public Interest Research Group study, "Do Roads Pay for Themselves?" Jan. 2011.)

At predicted future gasoline prices higher than \$5 per gallon and with consistent availability of fuel in doubt, the economic future of the West Coast cries out for improvements on the Cascades Corridor. Business travelers will flock to the trains as will those on holiday. And freight shippers will increasingly find trains to be more cost-effective than heavy trucks.

Much needs to be done to **prepare the Amtrak Cascades** for this likely future. The Washington Department of Transportation has documented well most of the work needed along the corridor in that state. Also the Oregon Department of Transportation has identified several major bottlenecks bedevil the implementation of more frequent, more reliable and faster trains, principally in the Portland area.

Necessary improvements north of Portland Union Station break down into three key projects: elevated tracks at Vancouver, Washington, to accommodate higher-speed passenger trains; a new passenger rail bridge across the Columbia River; and grade separation high above the notorious mesh of tracks known as the 'North Portland Triangle'. These cost-effective solutions are part of **AORTA's** recommendation to solve the vastly unaffordable \$3.6 billion **Columbia River Crossing** as proposed, while saving millions and sensibly reducing traffic congestion, auto pollution, and further environmental destruction.

South of Portland Union Station, public policy officials have the opportunity to adopt a higher-speed rail alignment that fits engineering reality. **AORTA** has presented the testimony of experts time and again, in public and in private discussions. Our organization will continue to point out the practicality of the Union Pacific alignment for passenger rail and the necessity of working closely with that carrier to improve the route.

We welcome and invite further discussion. Please direct questions to Donald Leap, **AORTA** President at (503) 789-2290 or e-mail: donaldl@teleport.com. Thank you.