

November 1, 2010

Recent transportation plans in the Portland metro area are woefully deficient in addressing serious issues required for higher-speed rail. There are two specific parts which need immediate attention: the route from Willsburg Junction (at Milwaukie) to Portland Union Station and the route from Portland Union Station to Vancouver, Washington. Without the proper planning, we cannot have faster, more frequent trains.

This letter is to call your attention to our concerns about the lack of consideration given to these matters by transportation planners and to request formation of a committee to find solutions.

The Cascade corridor (Eugene, Oregon, to Vancouver, BC) in 1992 was one of the very first federally designated high-speed passenger rail corridors in the nation. This corridor, which runs through Portland and nearby towns, won the designation in recognition of population densities proximate to the existing tracks, which carry currently scheduled Amtrak passenger trains.

Early this year, in January, the Obama administration awarded \$8 billion with no local match requirement for improving passenger rail corridors throughout the nation. Washington state received \$590 million and work has already begun to provide specific improvements to the corridor between Vancouver, Washington, and Seattle. Oregon received \$8 million, nearly all of which is being used for improving Union Station at Portland.

The administration has announced its intent to continue high-speed rail grants on an annual basis. These continuing grants may, however, require matching funds from the states.

This is where the planning—or lack thereof—gets disturbing. The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) Rail Division's recently released *2010 Oregon Rail Study* discusses potential changes to the existing corridor south of Willsburg Junction (at Milwaukie). But there is a notable absence of discussion about improvements needed to meet near-term frequency increases on the corridor between Willsburg Junction and Union Station, and between Union Station and Vancouver, WA.

This is the first problem since the rail study ignores this critical stretch of the corridor at a time shortly following Oregon's recent purchase of two new train-sets for the corridor. Also, Union Pacific Railroad has stated that, given current limited capacity on the existing tracks between Willsburg and Union Station, no additional passenger trains can be added on this segment of its railroad. (See enclosed the letter of July 6, 2010, from Jerry S. Wilmoth, General Manager, UP Network Infrastructure, to Kelly Taylor, Administrator, ODOT Rail Division.)

The second problem is north of Portland Union Station. Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) have developed both mid-range and long-range infrastructure plans to allow faster and more frequent passenger service between Vancouver, Washington, and Seattle.

This is a significant issue because this segment includes the area known as the North Portland Triangle along with the BNSF rail bridges over the Columbia River. It contains multiple major junction points used by both freight and passenger trains. Freight trains of the UPRR and the BNSF, together with switching movements by the Peninsula Terminal Company on multiple branch lines serving port facilities and local industry converge with the main line in the vicinity of the North Portland Triangle.

Generally, WSDOT's plans terminate in Vancouver, Washington, but the swing span of the Columbia River Bridge must be opened frequently for river traffic causing severe schedule disruptions of both freight and passenger trains. AORTA is not aware that ODOT is planning any significant infrastructure upgrades in this area to achieve the increased passenger train frequency and on-time performance that will be required. AORTA has specific recommendations for both an near and long-term solutions to this problem.

Therefore, given the Obama administration's emphasis on investing in higher speed rail and the failure of Oregon in recent months to capture significant federal funds, AORTA requests that a committee be formed to foster a more cohesive and unified approach to the near-term expansion and development of passenger train service in the Cascade corridor, including rail junctions in and around Portland.

This committee should be composed of representatives from the Oregon and Washington state Departments of Transportation, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway and Union Pacific Railroad, and AORTA along with appropriate regional government entities, such as Metro.

As we've noted, those funds will probably require some degree of match, but for the route's ultimate success, they will require adequate planning that addresses the above-noted infrastructure deficiencies.

Highest regards,

Jim Long, President

Distribution: Oregon Governor Kulongoski, and all members of the following:
Portland City Council, the Oregon Transportation Commission, JPACT, and Metro