Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study

Summary of Regional Working Group Meetings – Round 1

1.   Introduction

Under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA), FRA is conducting a study regarding the restoration of daily intercity rail passenger service in the United States. As part of the study, FRA is engaging with State DOTs, Amtrak, Class I Railroads, metropolitan planning organizations, regional passenger rail authorities, local officials, and listening to stakeholders, including transportation and rail partners, federally recognized tribes, and the broader stakeholder community as we evaluate how to better connect people with long-distance rail services. In January and February 2023, FRA hosted the first of four rounds of regional working group meetings across the United States to engage these stakeholders. The regions, dates, and locations of the first round of meetings are shown on Figure 1. All regional working group meetings followed a similar agenda, which is summarized in this document. Region-specific summaries are available on the project website at www.fralongdistancerailstudy.org.
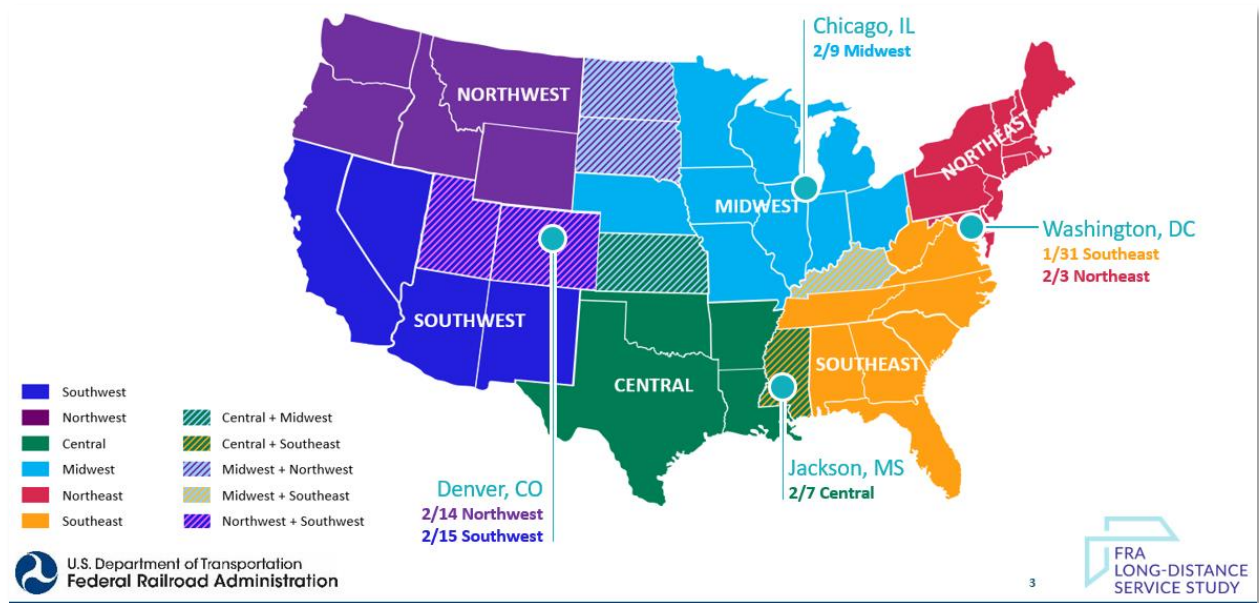

Figure 1. Map of Study Regions

2.   Welcome & Introductions

Each of the six meetings began with a welcome from FRA, followed by a review of housekeeping and safety information. Next, in-person and virtual attendees introduced themselves. FRA reviewed the meeting agenda and objectives, which included informing attendees about long-distance passenger rail service and the Amtrak Long-Distance Service Study; providing a briefing on the progress of the study's analysis of current routes,

discontinued routes, and travel market assessments; and receiving input from attendees on existing and planned rail infrastructure and services in the region, potential new routes, communities, frequencies, or service changes for the study to consider, evaluation factors, and recommendations on how Amtrak and communities can engage to support long-distance passenger rail services.

3.   Long-Distance Service 101

FRA provided a general overview of long-distance services. Statutorily defined, long-distance Amtrak routes are routes over 750 miles, between endpoints that Amtrak operates (defined in the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008). Amtrak currently operates 15 long-distance routes (13 daily in each direction and 2 – the Cardinal and Sunset Limited – operating three times per week in each direction), ranging from approximately 760 to 2,500 miles. Long-distance routes serve nearly half of the more than 500 train stations in the Amtrak system, and are part of Amtrak's National Network, which includes all routes outside of the Northeast Corridor (NEC) – including state-supported routes. The federal government currently provides operating financial assistance for long-distance routes via an annual grant to Amtrak, and long-distance routes operate almost entirely over host railroad tracks (not owned by Amtrak). FRA also reviewed maps of currently operating long-distance routes, including information about operating environments, host railroads, ticket types, and COVID-19 impacts to Amtrak service.

4.   Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study Overview

As directed in the IIJA, the study must evaluate the restoration of daily intercity rail passenger service along any Amtrak long-distance routes that were discontinued and any Amtrak long-distance routes that occur on a nondaily basis. FRA may also evaluate potential new Amtrak long-distance routes, with specific attention to routes in service as of April 1971 but not continued by Amtrak. FRA shared and overview of study scope, technical outputs, where the study fits in FRA's Project Lifecyle Stages, and the nexus of the study and FRA's Corridor Identification and Development Program.

Additionally, FRA presented an overview of the Long-Distance Service Study's stakeholders, engagement schedule (shown in Figure 2), and information about the study's website and social media presence.
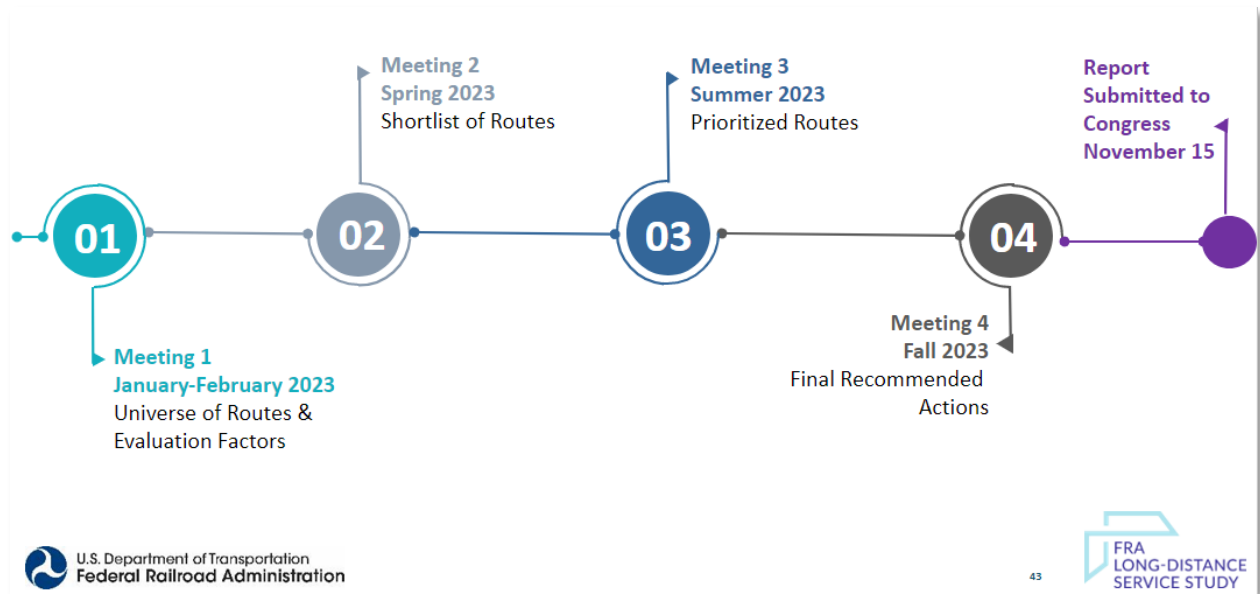

Figure 2. Engagement Schedule

5. Current Long-Distance Service

The FRA provided an overview of the current long-distance network and routes, including service and performance characteristics, ridership information, passenger load, trip length, connections and transfers, customer survey data, time of day analysis, and on-time performance. This section included nationwide data, as well as region-specific service and performance information.

6. Pre-1971 and Discontinued Routes

Next, the FRA presented information about pre-1971 and discontinued routes. They provided a high-level history of evaluations and cuts to long-distance passenger rail service, including the examination of long-distance route evaluations and cuts during the formation of Amtrak in 1970, the Amtrak Improvement Act of 1978, and the 1996 Amtrak Intercity Strategic Business Unit review of the long-distance network.

The FRA then reviewed region-specific long-distance routes that were discontinued before the 1971 formation of Amtrak, as well as long-distance routes discontinued since the formation of Amtrak.

7. Baseline & Market Conditions

Next, the FRA reviewed some of the sources and methods used in determining baseline and market conditions for the information presented. They noted that trip flow data were from the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Next-Gen Household Travel Survey passenger origin and destination data, and that Amtrak provided data on long-distance rail trips.

The FRA provided data on top station pairs by volume of long-distance rail trips, and regionally-specific data on trip flows and station-pairs by volume of long-distance rail trips.

8. Potential New Market Connections and Opportunities

To better understand priorities and projects in each region, each working group meeting was asked a series of questions pertaining to their region. The following questions were asked via an interactive online exercise using Mural, a virtual collaboration tool, in which meeting attendees could response using virtual sticky notes and comments:

- Are there state or local initiatives that could inform new or restored long-distance services?
- What previously discontinued long-distance services should we consider and why?
- In thinking about existing long-distance routes, what new frequencies and services changes should we consider and why?
- What new routes or communities do you want to extend long-distance service to and why?

A snapshot of the new market connections and opportunities interactive session is available on the project website.

8.1 Southeast Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Southeast region working group included efforts to attract new rider populations, re-establishing discontinued service with new alignments, providing rail service along the I-20 corridor, creating additional east/west routes, addressing delays on existing service, and connecting riders to National Parks.

8.2   Northeast Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Northeast region working group included the desire for additional east-west service, more frequency as opposed to new routes, lack of opportunity to expand stations, and the possibility of international long-distance service.

8.3   Central Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Central region working group included interest in two-time daily trips on all long-distance routes, support for the I-20 corridor, more north-south connectivity, and better connections to universities, gaming, military resources, and other activity centers.

8.4   Midwest Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Midwest region working group included interest in resuming the National Limited and North Coast Hiawatha routes, more service frequencies in the Midwest on current routes, and expanded service from Chicago to Kansas City and beyond.

8.5   Northwest Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Northwest region working group included greater frequency on existing routes, improvement to tracks to enable increased speeds for passenger rail, and increased north-south service in the Northwest region.

8.6   Southwest Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Southwest region working group included restoring the Desert Wind and Pioneer routes, considering daytime service for popular tourist destinations, increased frequencies, and improved speeds.

9.   Evaluation Factors

The FRA engaged meeting attendees in a discussion of potential evaluation factors to help guide development of new and restored long-distance routes. Attendees reviewed IIJA considerations for route restoration, then participated in an interactive online exercise using Mural, a virtual collaboration tool, in which attendees could view potential evaluation factors suggested by previous working group meetings, as well as suggest new ones.

Snapshots of the Mural exercises described in Section 8 and Section 9, for each regional working group meeting, are available on the project website.

9.1   Southeast Region Working Group Summary

Themes in the Southeast region working group included evaluating the number of connections a route would provide to enhance the national long-distance and regional intercity rail network, number of areas with higher-than-average disadvantaged populations, number of city pairs with highest ridership market potential, and operational cost and revenues.

9.2   Northeast Region Working Group Summary

Themes in the Northeast region working group included evaluating the number of areas with higher-than-average disadvantaged populations served by a route, schedule frequency and convenience, availability of local transit, route implementation feasibility versus known constraints, connections to airports and multimodal opportunities, and operation costs and revenues for the service.

9.3   Central Region Working Group Summary

Themes in the Central region working group included evaluating the number of large and small communities that a route would connect, the number of rural areas a route would serve, the number of communities that do not have intercity rail or other long-distance transportation, and the number of activity centers served.

9.4   Midwest Region Working Group Summary

Themes in the Midwest region working group included evaluating the number of large and small communities that a route would connect, number of areas with higher-than-average disadvantaged populations, schedule convenience and frequency, and number of rural areas a route would connect.

9.5   Northwest Region Working Group Summary

Themes in the Northwest region working group included the number of rural areas that routes would connect, availability of local transit and other connections in station communities along a route, number of areas with higher-than-average disadvantaged populations that a route would serve, ridership, economic benefits to communities along a route, and cost and schedule competitiveness with auto and air travel.

9.6   Southwest Region Working Group Summary

Themes in the Southwest region working group included the number of large and small communities that a route would connect, ridership, schedule frequency and convenience, economic benefits to communities along a route, and consideration for travel demand between major cities.

10. Amtrak and Communities Working Together

As part of the study, the IIJA directs FRA to "develop recommendations for methods by which Amtrak could work with local communities and organizations to develop activities and programs to continuously improve public use of intercity passenger rail service along each route." In this portion of the meeting, participants discussed how Amtrak and communities could work together to accomplish this.

10.1 Southeast Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Southwest region working group attendees included regional tourism and event marketing, connectivity with carshare and multimodal first/last mile solutions, marketing and partnership opportunities with chambers of commerce and casinos, and real-time signage.

10.2 Northeast Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Northeast region working group included working with states to support state service and market within local communities, outreach to unsupported communities, connectivity to other services, improved signage, increased transparency into fares, and last mile connections.

10.3 Central Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Central region working group included streamlining technology for better passenger and booking experiences, increased advertising, and volunteers at stations to help people and provide information to passengers.

10.4 Midwest Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Midwest region working group included working with metropolitan planning organizations to leverage their local understanding and connect with state departments of transportation, develop better connections to other modes of travel, real-time schedule updates and display monitors, coordination with universities and college towns, and highlighting the benefits of taking the train compared to air travel or driving.

10.5 Northwest Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Northwest region working group included establishing station hosts at stations in more rural areas without dedicated staff, ensuring that there are proper stations that go beyond a shelter, establishing first/last mile connections around stations, working with the community to understand what types of economic development tools would enhance stations best, and working with attractions near stations to encourage passenger rail use.

10.6 Southwest Region Working Group Summary

Discussion themes among the Southwest region working group included establishing station hosts at stations without dedicated staff, improving station sites and connections, promoting the climate benefits of rail travel, creating greater efficiencies in travel between modes, and advertising Amtrak to major destinations and events.

11. Closing & Next Steps

FRA noted that meeting materials would be posted on the project website, and any feedback on information presented should be submitted no later than March 17, 2023. Finally, FRA reviewed plans for future working group meetings in the spring, summer, and fall.

To view detailed meeting materials from all the regional working groups, please visit the project website.

12. Attendance

12.1 Southeast Region Working Group

- Alabama Department of Transportation
- Amtrak
- Atlanta Regional Commission
- Birmingham MPO
- Central Mississippi Planning & Development District
- Charlotte Regional Transportation Planning Organization
- City of Anniston, Alabama
- City of Louisville, Kentucky
- DC Department of Transportation
- Florida Department of Transportation

- Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization
- High Speed Rail Alliance
- I-20 Corridor Council
- Kentucky Regional Planning and Development Agency
- Kentucky Transportation Cabinet
- Louisville Office of Advanced Planning and Sustainability
- MetroPlan Orlando
- Mississippi Department of Transportation
- Multimodal Transportation Resources Division
- National Park Service
- Norfolk Southern Corporation
- North Carolina Department of Transportation
- Piedmont Rail Coalition
- Rail Passengers Association
- South Carolina Department of Transportation
- Southern Environmental Law Center
- Tennessee Department of Transportation
- Transportation for America
- United Rail Passenger Alliance
- University of Mississippi Trent Lott National Center
- University of Tennessee, Knoxville
- Virginia Department of Transportation
- Virginia Passenger Rail Authority
- West Virginia Department of Transportation
- West Virginia Regional Intergovernmental Council

12.2 Northeast Region Working Group

- Amtrak
- Baltimore Metropolitan Council
- Capitol Region Council of Governments
- Connecticut Capitol Region Council of Governments
- Connecticut Department of Transportation
- DC Department of Transportation
- Delaware Department of Transportation
- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission
- Empire State Passenger Association
- Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council
- Greater Portland Council of Governments
- Maine Department of Transportation
- Maryland Department of Transportation
- Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)
- Massachusetts Department of Transportation
- National Park Service
- New Hampshire Department of Transportation
- New Jersey Department of Transportation
- New Jersey Transit
- New York Regional Planning Association
- New York State Department of Transportation
- Norfolk Southern Corporation
- North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority

- Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation
- Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
- Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation System
- Rail Passengers Association
- Regional Plan Association
- Rhode Island Department of Transportation
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA)
- State Planning Council/Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program
- Vermont Agency of Transportation
- Wilmington Metropolitan Area Planning Council (WILMAPCO)

12.3 Central Region Working Group

- Amtrak
- Association of Central Oklahoma Governments
- Baton Rouge Area Foundation
- Bismarck-Mandan MPO
- Canadian Pacific
- Capital Area MPO (CAMPO)
- Central Mississippi Planning and Development District
- City of Monroe, Louisiana
- City of Ponca, Oklahoma
- City of Ruston, Louisiana
- City of Shawnee, Kansas
- City of Vicksburg, Mississippi
- CSRS
- CSX Transportation
- I-20 Corridor Council
- Indiana Department of Transportation
- Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Kansas Department of Transportation
- Kentuckiana Regional Planning & Development Agency (KIPDA)
- Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development
- Louisville Metro Government
- Meridian Rails Historical Society
- Michigan Department of Transportation
- Mid-America Regional Council
- Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission
- Mississippi Department of Transportation
- National Park Service
- Norfolk Southern Corporation
- North Central Texas Council of Governments
- North Delta Regional P&DD
- Northeast Arkansas Regional Transportation Planning Commission
- Northeastern Indiana Regional Coordinating Council
- Northern Flyer Alliance
- Northwest Louisiana MPO
- Oklahoma Department of Transportation
- Ouachita Council of Governments (OMPO)
- Rail Passengers Association
- South Central Oklahoma Rural Transportation Planning Organization

- Southern Oklahoma Development Association
- Southern Rail Commission
- Texas Department of Transportation
- Texas Rail Advocates
- Transportation for America
- Vicksburg Warren County Chamber of Commerce
- Wichita Area MPO

12.4 Midwest Region Working Group

- All Aboard Northwest
- Amtrak
- Bismarck-Mandan MPO
- Canadian National Railway
- Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP)
- Corridor Rail Development
- Council of the Great Lakes Region
- Environmental Law & Policy Center
- Fargo-Moorhead Metropolitan MPO
- Grand Forks – East Grand Forks Metropolitan Planning Organization
- High Speed Rail Alliance
- Illinois Department of Transportation
- Indiana Department of Transportation
- Indianapolis and Marion County
- Indianapolis MPO
- Iowa Department of Transportation
- Kansas Department of Transportation
- Kentucky Transportation Cabinet
- Lacrosse Area Planning Committee
- Louisville Office of Advance Planning and Sustainability
- Louisville/Jefferson County KY-IN MPO
- Michigan Department of Transportation
- Mid-America Regional Council (MARC)
- Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MOPRC)
- Minnesota Department of Transportation
- Missouri Department of Transportation
- National Park Service
- Norfolk Southern Corporation
- North Dakota Department of Transportation
- Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA)
- Northeastern Indiana Regional Coordinating Council (NIRCC)
- Ohio Department of Transportation
- Rail Passengers Association
- South Dakota Department of Transportation
- Southeast Michigan Council of Governments
- Union Pacific Railroad
- United Rail Passenger Alliance
- Wichita Area MPO
- Wisconsin Department of Transportation

12.5 Northwest Region Working Group

- All Aboard Northwest
- Amtrak
- Association of Idaho Cities
- Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority
- Bismarck-Mandan Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Cheyenne MPO
- Colorado Department of Transportation
- COMPASS
- Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua & Siuslaw Indians
- Denver Council of Governments
- Denver Regional Transportation District
- Dixie MPO
- Five County Association of Governments
- Front Range Passenger Rail District
- Grand Forks-East Grand Forks MPO
- Mid-Columbia Economic Development District
- Missoula MPO
- Montana Department of Transportation
- Montana State University – Western Transportation Institute
- National Park Service
- North Dakota Department of Transportation
- North Front Range MPO
- Oregon Department of Transportation
- Rail Passengers Association
- Southwestern Washington Regional Transportation Council
- Spokane Regional Transportation Council
- Union Pacific Railroad
- Utah Department of Transportation
- Utah Rail Passengers Association
- Utah Transit Authority
- Valley Regional Transit
- Wasatch Front Regional Council/Wasatch Front Economic Development District
- Washington State Department of Transportation
- Wyoming Department of Transportation
- Yakama Nation

12.6 Southwest Region Working Group

- All Aboard Arizona
- Amtrak
- Arizona Department of Transportation
- Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments
- California Department of Transportation
- Colorado Department of Transportation
- Denver Regional Council of Governments
- Dixie MPO
- Las Cruces MPO
- Los Angeles Metro

- Maricopa County Association of Governments
- Mesilla Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization
- National Park Service
- Nevada Department of Transportation
- Nevada League of Cities and Municipalities
- New Mexico Department of Transportation
- North Front Range MPO
- Rail Passengers Association
- Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada
- Riverside County Transportation Commission
- San Jose State University
- Southern California Regional Rail Authority
- Union Pacific Railroad
- United Rail Passenger Alliance
- University of California, Davis
- Utah Department of Transportation
- Utah Rail Passengers Association
- Utah Transit Authority
- Valley Metro