

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study Northeast Regional Working Group Meeting 2

Date: July 25, 2023, 9 am-2:45 pm ET

Location: 1801 Market St, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103

1. Introduction

Under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA), FRA is conducting a study to evaluate the restoration of daily intercity passenger rail 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, including with specific attention provided to routes in service as of April 1971 but not continued by Amtrak.

As part of this study, FRA is engaging with State Departments of Transportation, Amtrak, Class I Railroads, metropolitan planning organizations, regional passenger rail authorities, and local officials as well as transportation and rail partners, federally recognized tribes, and the broader community, as they 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, in six separate regions, to engage members of the regional working groups. The second round of meetings was held in July 2023, with the Northeast regional meeting taking place on July 25. The purpose of this round of meetings was to brief regional working group members about the progress of the study, inform participants of the methodology for developing an enhanced long-distance rail network, and receive input on potential new routes and the baseline and enhanced networks.

The meeting was held both in person in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as well as online for virtual participants. Each regional working group meeting followed a similar agenda, which is summarized below:

- Welcome and Introductions
- Study Overview – What We’ve Heard So Far
- Baseline Network Overview
- Enhanced Network Development
- Discussion of Enhanced Network
- Comparison of Enhanced and Baseline Networks
- Route Development and Feedback
- Stakeholder Insights for Ongoing Feedback Opportunities

This summary provides both an overview of the information shared at the Northeast regional working group meeting and an overview of meeting attendee feedback and conversations that occurred throughout the day.

2. Welcome and Introductions

The Northeast regional meeting began with a welcome from the FRA study team, followed by a review of housekeeping and safety information. Next, in-person and virtual attendees introduced themselves and the FRA study team reviewed the meeting agenda and objectives. Regional working group participants in attendance, both in-person and virtually, are listed at the end of this summary.

Figure 1. Participants at Northeast Regional Working Group Meeting 2 on July 25 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



3. Study Overview and What We've Heard So Far

The FRA study team began by providing meeting attendees with an overview of the study scope and what has occurred since the first round of regional meetings. The FRA study team detailed the legislative direction for the study, which will result in a report to Congress that includes recommendations for preferred options for restoring or enhancing long-distance service, a review of funding options, estimated costs and public benefits of long-distance service enhancement or restoration, and a prioritized inventory of capital projects to restore or enhance service. The overview gave an opportunity for participants to understand the study's objectives and FRA's vision for using their feedback in the future.

Next, the FRA study team provided a summary of feedback received during the first series of the regional meetings and the comments received from the study website. The team highlighted the critical role of stakeholder input in the development of study evaluation factors and gave an overview of public comments as they pertained to geographic and service priorities.

4. Network Definitions

Next, the FRA study team shared background information about the network concepts that the study will evaluate. Four network concepts were presented: the Existing Network, the Baseline Network, the Discontinued Network, and the Enhanced Network. Development of the Enhanced Network comprised most of the working group discussion during the meeting.

The Existing Network is defined as current intercity passenger rail services, including current long-distance services, state-supported services, and Northeast Corridor services. The Baseline Network is defined as the Existing Network with the addition of several other forthcoming intercity passenger rail services. The FRA study team developed a Baseline Network solely for the purpose of comparing the near-term "current" intercity passenger rail services with the potential future Enhanced Network of long-distance services.

The FRA study team also defined the Discontinued Network as all long-distance routes that were in service as of April 1971 but were not continued by Amtrak, and long-distance routes that were previously operated by Amtrak but have since been discontinued.

5. Enhanced Network Development

The FRA study team defined the Enhanced Network as the expanded and interconnected passenger rail network for rail service and expansion. The Enhanced Network is comprised of the Baseline Network, portions of the Discontinued Network, plus new segments where long-distance passenger rail service has not previously operated.

The Enhanced Network is not routes; it is comprised of conceptual segments between Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) that can inform future route development.

After defining the different networks, the FRA study team presented the four IJA considerations used to guide the development of an Enhanced Network, taking into consideration how the network could:

- link and serve large and small communities as part of a regional rail network
- advance the economic and social well-being of rural areas of the United States
- provide enhanced connectivity for the national long-distance passenger rail system
- reflect public engagement and local and regional support for restored passenger rail service

The FRA study team then showed meeting attendees the four-step process used to create an Enhanced Network with conceptual segments for future route development consideration. Step 1 included reviewing travel flows by all modes (travel by car, plane, bus, and rail) to show market demand between metropolitan areas not served directly by rail in the Existing Network. The FRA study team used Federal Highway Administration NextGen data for this analysis. Step 2 addressed rural accessibility, including an evaluation of access to rural counties, tribal lands, and USDOT Justice40 disadvantaged communities. Step 3 addressed geographic coverage/network connectivity and reviewed passenger rail service by state, as well as regional rail plans, to provide enhanced network connectivity for long-distance passenger rail. And finally, Step 4 addressed stakeholder input and highlighted where stakeholders were most interested in seeing service enhancements.

Based on the four-step process described above, the FRA study team presented Northeast region meeting attendees with potential segments that could be used as part of the Enhanced Network. More detailed regional conceptual maps were also shared to further show how new segments could be added in the Northeast region.

Detailed Enhanced Network maps are available in the [presentation](#).

6. Discussion of Enhanced Network

The presentation of the Enhanced Network concept prompted questions and comments from Northeast region meeting attendees.

After the presentation of the enhanced network, one attendee asked if during the Enhanced Network development FRA compared demand for trips that are not currently possible by rail with the demand for trips on existing services where there's only one train a day. The FRA study team responded that at this point in the study the Enhanced Network concept focuses on the general geography of route segments, and does not factor in comparisons of demand between areas with and without existing rail services. The FRA study team added that in the future differing levels of demand will be factored into decision-making.

One attendee encouraged FRA to prepare educational materials that would aid in information sharing with the general public as well as policymakers to help conceptualize the frequency of long-distance rail. An Amtrak staff member agreed, noting that it will be important to emphasize the combination of state-supported and long-distance services.

7. Comparison of Enhanced and Baseline Networks

The next portion of the meeting focused on comparing the concept of the Enhanced Network to the Baseline Network to show the benefits of an Enhanced Network.

During the first round of regional working group meetings in January and February 2023, meeting attendees identified potential evaluation factors for the FRA study team to use to guide development of new or restored long-distance service. Based on this feedback, the FRA study team developed goals and objectives, with associated measures of effectiveness to evaluate the Enhanced Network.

- Connectivity
 - Increase passenger access to the national passenger rail network
 - Improve passenger rail geographic coverage
- Large and Small Communities
 - Increase long-distance passenger rail connections to small communities
- Economic and Social Well-Being of Rural Areas
 - Enhance access for historically disadvantaged populations
 - Enhance access for tribal areas
 - Enhance rural access to services

The FRA study team presented the measures of effectiveness results comparing the Baseline Network and Enhanced Network. Detailed information pertaining to each evaluation measure is available in the [presentation](#).

8. Route Development and Feedback (Interactive Exercises 1 and 2)

The FRA study team sought discussion and ideas from meeting attendees on future long-distance route development via several interactive activities. This portion of the meeting used an interactive digital tool (Mural) to capture ideas and help participants visualize each other's ideas.

During the first exercise, meeting attendees used sticky notes and a digital map of the Enhanced Network segments to create new long-distance routes.

One participant advocated for rail that connects more areas to New York City. Another participant created a potential route connecting the north and south of the Front Range region.

A Chicago to Los Angeles route was proposed by another participant to better connect small communities and fulfill the goal of serving more congressional districts.

Another meeting attendee asked why international markets (primarily Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal) are left out of the Enhanced Network. The FRA study team responded that, while they are popular end-point destinations based on stakeholder input at regional working group meetings, the IJIA did not direct FRA to study international routes.

The second Mural interactive activity allowed meeting attendees to draw potential new long-distance routes directly on to a digital map. During this activity, a meeting participant proposed routes from Pittsburgh to Atlanta and Pittsburgh to Nashville, primarily because they have heard from the general public that they are "disaffected" by air travel and willing to spend longer time on the ground to get to southern destinations.

A Denver to Flagstaff route was also drawn by a participant with the idea to better connect national parks by rail. They also discussed shifting away from car-focused vacations by thinking about what the classic rail trip in America would look like instead of the classic road trip.

Results of the interactive activities are available on the [project website](#).

9. Stakeholder Insights for Ongoing Feedback Opportunities (Interactive Exercises 3 and 4)

Section 22214 of the IIJA requires 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.

The last two interactive activities of the day were designed to give meeting attendees an opportunity to discuss ideas and insights for future engagement and ongoing long-distance service feedback that FRA and Amtrak can use in the future.

In the third interactive activity, meeting attendees were asked to consider how Amtrak and FRA could best coordinate with stakeholders about long-distance service. Meeting participants were asked to consider both current service and future service, what type of stakeholder input is most essential, and who/what groups should be involved in providing that input. Then they provided ideas for discussion on digital sticky notes via the interactive Mural tool.

One meeting attendee recommended engagement with European rail services to model certain practices in the U.S. after their programs. One participant stressed the importance of coordinating programs like this with municipal and state-run transportation networks. Another attendee cautioned that there may not be as much interest in this type of coordination as they think, based on a previous study that examined linking state-run services with long-distance routes.

For the final exercise, meeting attendees were asked to share examples of organizations or coordinating groups that have worked well for efforts with similar goals as the Long-Distance Service Study. One idea proposed by a meeting attendee was to utilize the organized planning structures that already exist under MPOs to better coordinate long-distance rail. Another attendee cautioned that some MPOs have too many competing priorities to effectively coordinate long-distance rail efforts because they are often focused on highways and transit.

Another meeting participant discussed modeling long-distance rail collaboration after highway corridor groups that bring together multiple state and local stakeholders affected by a highway system, allowing long-distance routes to have the same types of coalitions associated with them.

Results of the interactive activities are available on the [project website](#).

10. Conclusion

The Northeast regional working group meeting concluded with a look ahead at the future of the Long-Distance Service Study, which will include two more rounds of working group meetings. The FRA study team outlined study next steps, including confirming and adapting the Enhanced Network based on stakeholder feedback, developing potential routes, and planning future meetings. Future rounds of regional working group meetings will include cost and benefit reviews, route prioritization review, and recommendation/strategy review.

Attendees

- Amtrak
- Baltimore Metropolitan Council
- Capitol Region Council of Governments
- Delaware Department of Transportation
- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission
- District Department of Transportation
- Empire State Passengers Association
- FRA
- Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council
- Greater Portland Council of Governments
- Maine Department of Transportation
- Maryland Department of Transportation
- National League of Cities
- National Park Service
- National Railroad Passenger Corporation
- New Hampshire Department of Transportation
- New Jersey Department of Transportation
- New York State Department of Transportation
- Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation
- Rail Passengers Association
- Rhode Island Division of Statewide Planning
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority
- Wilmington Area Planning Council