

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

Date: July 11, 2023, 9 am-2:45 pm ET

Location: Jacobs, 10 Tenth Street NE, Suite 1400, Atlanta, GA 30309

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 Southeast regional meeting taking place on July 11. 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 Atlanta, Georgia, 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 Southeast regional working group meeting and an overview of meeting attendee feedback and conversations that occurred throughout the day.

2. Welcome and Introductions

The Southeast 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 Southeast Regional Working Group Meeting 2 on July 11 in Atlanta, Georgia



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 the 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 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; and
- 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 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 Justice 40 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 Southeast 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 Southeast 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 Southeast region meeting attendees. One attendee commented that it is important to take into consideration that many of the routes that were discontinued in the late 20th century will no longer serve the population in the same way they did before. The attendee continued that the Enhanced Network presented during the meeting may be different than what the public is expecting out of the study, because many people view the study as simply determining which discontinued routes should or should not be restored. This sparked a conversation about restoring passengers' "nostalgia maps" that are based on dated population statistics and rider needs, as opposed to contemporary statistics and needs. Several meeting attendees referred to the rapid changes in the population in the Southeast region. The FRA study team noted that the study, while meeting Congressional requirements, is taking a holistic view about the network should look like in the present and future.

During the discussion about the Enhanced Network, the FRA study team noted that longer routes may result in some markets only being served at night. A meeting participant suggested that if capital investments are required to make a corridor possible there would be a much higher return on the public investment to at least provide

two frequencies per day, preferably bookended, so that there is no night arrival time problem for certain communities.

Another meeting attendee asked whether economic development projects and investments happening at the local level will have any impact on selecting route segments. The FRA study team responded that this will likely be part of the evaluation in future working group meetings.

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 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

An attendee asked whether the study team included mid-sized population centers alongside the rural and metropolitan areas in evaluating measures. The FRA study team responded that the measures evaluates all sizes of communities, including micropolitan statistical areas.

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)

During the afternoon, 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 suggest potential new long-distance routes.

Many of the routes recommended by the meeting attendees were east-west routes. A meeting attendee advocated for an east-west route from southwest Virginia to cities like Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and St. Louis, commenting that the connection is desired but there is no convenient way to access those locations by rail.

After a New Orleans to Sanford, FL auto train route was proposed via the interactive activity, one meeting attendee advocated for the concept of auto trains in general, adding that they often receive email questions about why they are not more common.

An attendee also advocated for a route connecting the Minneapolis/St. Paul region to Texas, which would mean that passengers would not have to go east to Chicago before heading south to Texas. They added that they weren't sure if this would be possible without a connection between Omaha, Nebraska, and Newton, Kansas.

The second Mural interactive activity allowed meeting attendees to draw potential new long-distance routes directly on to a digital map. Many of the proposed routes drawn by meeting attendees were east-west connections, and as meeting attendees drew their proposed routes, many potential "hubs" emerged, such as Kansas City, Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver, and Atlanta.

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.

Meeting attendees provided many ideas, including setting up a coalition of mayors from cities that would potentially be served in the future, coordinating with social service organizations like medical centers, and FRA engagement with other federal entities like the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security. A meeting attendee highlighted the need for "ground truthing," a boots-on-the-ground approach that would empower Amtrak employees to ask passengers for their opinions on service. Coordination with other long-distance transportation services like Greyhound was also mentioned.

In consideration of future service, a meeting attendee brought up the necessity to plan for medium- to long-term climate impacts. Since rail expansions are long-term capital investments, they said that it is a good idea to consider where rail is built/improved and how climate change will affect constructability and maintenance. The attendee also referred to climate migration as a necessary consideration as well as sea-level rise.

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. Organizations that meeting attendees offered as examples included the Rail Passengers Association and I-95 Corridor Coalition, among others.

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

10. Conclusion

The Southeast 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
- Birmingham Regional Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Charlotte Regional Transportation Planning Organization
- DC Department of Transportation
- Environmental Law & Policy Center of the Midwest
- Florida Department of Transportation
- Georgia Department of Transportation
- Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization
- I-20 Corridor Council
- Louisville Metro Government
- National Parks 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
- Virginia Department of Transportation
- Virginia Passenger Rail Authority