

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study Southeast Regional Working Group Meeting 3

Date: February 7, 2024, 9 am - 4 pm EST

Location: Charlotte Mecklenburg Government Center (CMGC), 600 East 4th Street, Charlotte, NC 28202

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 the study, FRA is engaging with State Departments of Transportation (DOTs), Amtrak, Class I Railroads, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), regional passenger rail authorities, and 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.

So far, FRA has hosted three of four total rounds of regional working group meetings across the United States, in six separate regions, to engage these stakeholders. This third round of meetings was held in February 2024, with the Southeast regional meeting taking place on February 7. The purpose of this round of meetings was to brief stakeholders about the progress of the study; inform participants of the methodology for developing routes, route schedules, and cost estimates; review preferred routes; and receive feedback on prioritization concepts for implementation timeframes and ongoing collaboration and planning.

The meeting was held both in person in Charlotte, North Carolina, 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
- Route Development and Evaluation Methodology
- Discussion of Route Development and Evaluation
- Identification of Routes
- Discussion of Route Identification
- Approach for Development of Route Service
- Development of Capital and Operations & Maintenance Cost Estimates
- Prioritization and Implementation Feedback
- Ongoing Collaboration and Planning

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 working group meeting began with a welcome from FRA, followed by a review of housekeeping and safety information. Next, in-person and virtual attendees introduced themselves and the 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 3 on February 7 in Charlotte, North Carolina



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

FRA began by providing meeting attendees with an overview of the study scope and what had occurred since the last round of regional meetings in July 2023. FRA 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.

One participant asked if the study involved polling riders. The study team specified future project planning could include more targeted public, stakeholder, and rider engagement and analysis.

Next, the study team provided a summary of feedback received during the second series of regional meetings and the comments received from the study website. The team gave an overview of comments as they pertained to geographic and service priorities.

4. Route Development and Evaluation Methodology

Next, the study team presented attendees with the methodology used to develop and evaluate potential routes. This was approached in three sections. First, the team discussed the methodology used to develop potential new long-distance routes, followed by a description of the methodology used to evaluate them.

The methodology for developing potential routes was informed by the four IIJA legislative considerations that guide the study: link and serve large and small communities, advance the economic and social well-being of the

United States, provide enhanced connectivity, and reflect public engagement and local and regional support. Routes were developed to address metropolitan area travel flows, rural accessibility, and geographic coverage/network connectivity. The methodology also considered stakeholder input and discontinued long-distance routes. This resulted in a range of route options for evaluation.

To evaluate route options, the team utilized criteria that aligned with the legislative considerations, including:

- Metropolitan Area Travel Flows
- Rural Accessibility
- Geographic Coverage/Network Connectivity
- Stakeholder Input

The study team also leveraged knowledge and experience of rail planning and considered the previously discontinued routes to evaluate routes.

5. Discussion of Route Development and Evaluation Methodology

One attendee asked about the methodology for selecting the proposed preferred route termini or endpoints listed on the proposed network of preferred routes. The study team responded that the endpoints were identified via the developed segments. The team developed the segments as part of the Enhanced Network (which was presented during the previous round of Regional Working Group meetings in July 2023), then identified the endpoints, then used the segments in the Enhanced Network to connect the major markets.

An attendee expressed some concern about trips that were excluded from the preferred route evaluation. The evaluation methodology excluded some local trips between MSA pairs within 100 miles of each other that exceeded the 80th percentile of all demand for a given route option to accurately reflect demand for potential new long-distance routes. These local trips were only removed in the evaluation of potential route options. These localized trips are still included in overall total travel demand estimates of the preferred routes and will be used when considering potential future ridership.

6. Identification of Routes

After discussing methodology, the study team presented the proposed network of preferred routes map to the working group. The map showed the proposed preferred routes illustrated on top of the baseline map of existing service. The restoration of daily Cardinal and Sunset Limited passenger rail service was assumed when identifying the proposed network of preferred routes. The 15 proposed preferred routes were:

- Chicago - Miami
- Dallas/Fort Worth - Miami
- Denver - Houston
- Los Angeles - Denver
- Phoenix - Minneapolis/St. Paul
- Dallas/Fort Worth - New York
- Houston - New York
- Seattle - Denver
- San Antonio - Minneapolis/St. Paul
- San Francisco - Dallas/Fort Worth
- Detroit - New Orleans
- Denver - Minneapolis/St. Paul

- Seattle - Chicago
- Dallas/Fort Worth - Atlanta
- El Paso - Billings

The study team then outlined key takeaways from the comparison between the baseline network and preferred network, which included:

- 45 million additional Americans reached by rail
- 61 additional Metropolitan Statistical Areas served
- 91% of all U.S. higher education institutions served
- 75 total National Parks, Recreation Areas, and Preserves served
- 43% increase in rural and transportation-disadvantaged populations served
- 74% of previously unserved populations on tribal lands served
- 23,200 long-distance route miles added
- 86% of all U.S. medical centers served

Please see the regional working group presentation at <https://fralongdistancerailstudy.org/meeting-materials/> for additional information and data descriptions related to these takeaways.

7. Discussion of Route Identification

During the presentation of the preferred routes, the working group discussed and provided feedback on each individual route.

A meeting attendee expressed concern that the proposed Houston-New York route does not adequately serve the Houston-New York travel market, but rather Washington-Atlanta (via Chattanooga and Western Virginia), and Atlanta-Houston (via New Orleans, Mobile, and Montgomery). The study team noted that when evaluating route options, the team used criteria that aligned with the legislative considerations, which includes metropolitan area travel flows, rural accessibility, geographic coverage/network connectivity, and stakeholder input, and the route identified served all those criteria well.

The attendee suggested de-emphasizing the endpoints for those who do not understand intercity passenger rail and emphasizing that these routes are intended to build a network and serve intermediate markets.

Another attendee asked why the study team selected Chattanooga, and not Charlotte, on the Houston-New York route, and if factors of cost and travel time would be considered. The study team replied that Charlotte was not included on the Houston-New York route because Charlotte is already served by the baseline network between Atlanta and Lynchburg. In addition, the study team noted that capital costs and operating costs were not considered in the evaluation of route options, although estimates will be developed later in the study. If the routes have existing long-distance stations that are in service, they will be used (this applies to all 15 proposed routes). For discontinued routes that have had stations in the past, the stations could be reactivated as new stations.

Another attendee added that Bristol, VA has been an active advocate on both the Corridor ID program and the long-distance study.

An attendee noted that the Atlanta-New York portion of the route is not going to have much ridership going through Chattanooga. They were concerned that low ridership may result in another loss of service. Instead, this participant suggested a route through Charlotte or Nashville to ensure strong ridership. FRA noted that they have evaluated Charlotte to Atlanta as part of a broader Southeast high-speed rail corridor between Washington

DC and Orlando through the Southeast Regional Rail Study¹. The existing rail network between East Tennessee and Nashville is quite circuitous and does not lend itself to adequate or appropriate travel times.

8. Approach for Development of Route Service

Once the study team reviewed the preferred routes, they presented the development of conceptual run times, which will eventually inform conceptual schedules. These conceptual run times and schedules will be used to inform cost estimation, travel demand estimation, and future investment analysis. The study team then gave an overview of the conceptual run times developed for each preferred route.

An attendee asked if the impact of terrain on train speeds was considered. The study team shared that terrain is not currently part of the study but could be considered during service development planning.

After the conceptual run time for the Houston-New York route was presented, an attendee asked if the study team considered how existing bus services, especially in rural areas, might impact ridership, given that bus service is often a more affordable option. The study team responded that these factors could be considered in the future.

Another attendee asked why Amtrak Thruway connecting bus service was used, rather than the Empire Builder, when reviewing travel times from Kansas City to Minneapolis/St. Paul on the current long-distance network, compared to the proposed preferred route from San Antonio to Minneapolis/St. Paul. A member of the study team confirmed that they looked at the Empire Builder and found that taking the Southwest Chief and connecting to a Thruway bus provided a shorter travel time on the existing network than connecting to the Empire Builder, when traveling from Kansas City to Minneapolis/St. Paul on the current network.

9. Development of Capital and Operations & Maintenance Cost Estimates

Next, the study team gave an overview of the methodology used to develop capital cost estimates in addition to operations and maintenance (O&M) estimates.

The overview of the capital cost estimate methodology included a description of different types of passenger service-specific project costs associated with implementing new long-distance routes. Cost estimates will be developed using the FRA Budgeting Tool's Standard Cost Categories (SCC) system, which classifies different types of costs into different categories. The methodology to estimate capital costs was developed to provide high-level order-of-magnitude capital costs to support early project planning. Capital cost estimates include 35% allocated contingency to address project risks. Capital cost estimates will include passenger-service-specific project costs, including track upgrades, stations, maintenance facilities, and signaling/communications/positive train control, and rolling stock. It does not include capacity improvement projects.

To estimate O&M costs, the team used Amtrak Performance Tracking statistics for fiscal year 2019 and applied weighted average unit costs for existing long-distance routes to preferred routes with the same number of nights and days operated per week. The O&M cost estimates will also be reported as a range. The low- and high-range of cost estimates for O&M will reflect the variation in marginal unit costs by operating statistic of existing long-distance routes.

An attendee noted that FRA does not intend to address capacity improvements at this time or as part of the study but inquired if it was possible for a placeholder project cost or per mile cost to be included to address capacity improvements. The study team responded that, based on the wide variability of routes across the nation, assigning an average dollar amount may not be possible, but that they would consider how to capture this in the final report to Congress.

¹ <https://railroads.dot.gov/rail-network-development/planning/systems-planning/regional-rail-planning>

An attendee asked if it was possible to estimate the marginal cost savings of having a shared station with an existing route. The study team responded that the study could address issues like marginal costs in shared staffed stations at a qualitative level in the final report to Congress.

10. Interactive Session: Prioritization and Implementation Timeframes Feedback

After the presentation of cost estimate methodology, the meeting transitioned to an interactive activity using Mural, an online interactive tool. The activity allowed meeting attendees (both in the room and participating online) to provide input on route prioritization, and which considerations they thought were the most important. Prioritization considerations were sorted into five categories: public and rider benefits, capital cost estimates, O&M cost estimates, complexity in development and implementation, and consistency with intercity passenger rail projects.

During the interactive activity, attendees placed dots onto virtual sticky notes that listed the categories for consideration, allowing for a visualization of which categories attendees thought were most important. The attendees were also asked to share other examples of considerations that they thought were important.

The interactive activity revealed that the Southeast regional working group participants viewed “public and rider benefits” as the most important. “Capital cost estimates” and “complexity in development and implementation” and “consistency with intercity passenger rail projects” all tied as the second most important category to consider when prioritizing implementation of routes.

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

11. Ongoing Collaboration and Planning

After the interactive activities, the study team presented ideas for ongoing collaboration and interaction with other organizations and stakeholders. In the last meeting series, participants were asked how FRA and Amtrak could coordinate with stakeholders about current and future long-distance services. The team presented the themes that arose during the conversation, including community and rider engagement as well as coordinated planning. They also reviewed potential models of governance bodies.

Following this review, FRA introduced the idea of a new Long-Distance Public Committee. The committee could serve several functions and focus on ongoing feedback for long-distance service.

An attendee stressed that incorporating Justice40² communities and rural areas is important in continued collaboration and feedback mechanisms, including how services are marketed and fare policies.

An attendee commented that the State-Amtrak Intercity Passenger Rail Committee is a successful venue for the states to work together to interface with FRA and with Amtrak on things that are of mutual concern. They indicated there may be a challenge in overlaying a national network with what has historically been state-funded service as it pertains to funding but also overall service.

Another attendee noted that intercity passenger rail is largely a commercial service, so the recent Food and Beverage Working Group is a good analog for a group that was stood up quickly and produced substantive results. Another attendee suggested referring to the previous Amtrak Customer Advisory Committee (ACAC) as a guideline.

An attendee noted that when looking at models for a committee of this kind, the study team might also look at the work of the Texas Eagle Marketing and Performance Organization (TEMPO). The study team noted that TEMPO is on the list of organizations to review.

² <https://www.transportation.gov/equity-Justice40>

An attendee mentioned that membership organizations that are frequently interfacing with states throughout the country would be a strong conduit for feedback and stakeholder engagement.

The study team also introduced an idea for a recurring, high-level long-distance planning process, potentially updated approximately every five years. The process would document existing long-distance service, trends and forecasts, proposed rail programs and investments, as well as the status of previously proposed long-distance passenger rail plans, projects, or other programs.

An attendee mentioned that state rail plans are updated every four years. They suggested making the process for long-distance planning every four years for consistency.

The same attendee said state rail planning is frequently done in conjunction with host railroads. They noted short lines railroads are significant for supporting rural America, so they should be included as well.

Another attendee stressed that municipalities and MPOs where new stations or equipment are being added should be part of future conversation.

12. Conclusion

The Southeast regional working group meeting concluded with a look ahead at the future of the Long-Distance Service Study, which will include a final round of regional working group meetings in the early summer. FRA outlined study next steps, including identification of preferred routes for near, mid, and long-term implementation. The next round of regional working group meetings will include costs and public benefits of the preferred routes, presentation of the implementation schedules for the preferred routes, and presentation of the recommended actions of the study.

Attendees

- Amtrak
- Charlotte Area Transit System
- Charlotte Mecklenburg Planning Commission
- Florida Department of Transportation
- FRA
- Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization MPO
- I-20 Corridor Council
- Kentuckiana Regional Planning & Development Agency
- Kentucky Transportation Cabinet
- Louisville Metro Government
- North Carolina Department of Transportation
- Rail Passengers Association
- Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham
- South Carolina Department of Transportation
- Southern Environmental Law Center
- Southern Rail Commission
- Tennessee Department of Transportation
- Transportation for America
- Town of Matthews, NC
- Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation
- Virginians for High Speed Rail
- Virginia Passenger Rail Authority