

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

Date: February 15, 2024, 9 am - 4 pm EST

Location: Volpe National Transportation Systems Center - 220 Binney Street, Cambridge, MA 02124

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 Northeast regional meeting taking place on February 15. 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 Cambridge, Massachusetts, 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 Methodology
- 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 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 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

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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 3 on February 15 in Cambridge, Massachusetts



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.

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 IJJA 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

An attendee asked whether the study team had considered origin or terminus stations in Canada or Mexico. The team responded that the scope of the study only applies to the lower 48 states of the U.S. International service was not considered as part of the study.

Another attendee asked the team what process they used to determine access to rural areas. The study team clarified that communities were counted as being served if they were within a 30- or 50-mile catchment area, depending on whether the existing station or former station location was located in a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) or a non-MSA area. For entirely new segments where long-distance passenger rail has not operated previously, a 30- or 50-mile catchment area was placed around the segment, depending on where the segment is in an MSA or non-MSA area. The team also clarified that this distance was increased to 100 miles to determine access to National Parks, Recreation Areas, or Preserves.

One attendee suggested that when reporting out how the routes perform under the evaluation criteria it could also bolster public and political support to include additional metrics about routes, such as how many military bases and Historically Black Colleges and Universities would gain service.

Another attendee asked if the final report to Congress will include identified stakeholders and who was coordinated with during the study. The team responded that the IIJA outlined specific groups that were necessary for FRA to engage with, and that these organizations and the approach to engaging with them will be outlined within the report.

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 the routes.

One attendee suggested the study team consider European travelers' desire to connect between airports and train stations, citing feedback from European travelers flying through the Manchester-Boston Regional Airport.

During the presentation of the Dallas/Fort Worth - Miami route, an attendee suggested that having the preferred route pass through Orlando, Florida, would allow riders to ride Brightline trains and get to Miami quickly. Another attendee asked if the reason the route didn't include Orlando was because the preferred Chicago - Miami route already passes through the city. The study team responded that the preferred Dallas/Fort Worth -Miami route allows service to Daytona Beach, Florida, and combined with the Chicago - Miami route (which passes through Orlando) the network provides more service to north Florida.

While the study team was presenting the route Los Angeles - Denver, one attendee asked whether the route passes through the region of the state where Bryce Canyon and Zion parks are. The team responded that the route does get close to the area, given the constraints of the existing North American Rail Network for eligible track.

An attendee asked why the Phoenix - Minneapolis/St. Paul route did not extend to Tucson, Arizona. The study team responded that an extension to Tucson could be considered during future analysis, but that during this stage, Phoenix was chosen as the origin due to its market demand.

On the topic of the preferred Detroit - New Orleans route, an attendee said that the study team's preferred route did a good job at connecting disadvantaged communities.

As the study team presented their evaluation of how rural economic and social well-being would be improved by the preferred network, one attendee noted that rail travel can be prohibitively expensive. They asked whether the study team had factored in affordability to their models for rural community wellbeing. The study team responded that fare structure will not be assessed during the study process, but that long-distance coach fares are often lower-cost than some train fares within the northeast.

During the discussion about the study's connectivity goal, an attendee questioned whether the numbers of increased population reached by the preferred network would truly sway politicians' approval. They cautioned

that many of the routes connect large cities, but in between are large swaths of open spaces. The study team responded that throughout the study they have made it a goal to balance the goal of rural connectivity with responding to travel demand between large markets.

Another attendee appreciated that the preferred network would appeal broadly to legislators in Congress because of how well it responds to both rural and urban interests across the country. An attendee agreed, speaking to how the additional congressional districts served by the network would allow for stronger political support.

Another conversation about connectivity to National Park Service land was brought up by an attendee who asked the study team if they would estimate park visitors by rail. Another attendee added to the discussion by noting that by connecting certain parks by rail, like Zion National Park in Utah, travelers could go on truly car-free trips due to the robust shuttle/tour systems already in place in those areas. The study team responded that they would consider including a qualitative discussion within their documentation that explores the potential interplay between the National Park Service and future passenger rail projects.

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.

One attendee expressed concern for the possibility of missed connections in hub cities due to train delays. They asked the study team whether that was a consideration in the service analysis. The team responded that they are aware of the concern and clarified that the run times are conceptual based on schedules of existing long-distance routes, and do not reflect actual performance on long-distance routes or future rail traffic conditions. Another attendee noted that, with once-daily frequency, it would be highly unlikely that passengers could consistently plan trips with connections between long-distance routes, due to the low likelihood that two train schedules would overlap in the right place at the right time. A third attendee also added that it is important to keep in mind that while train speeds are comparably slow right now, connectivity and future reduction in train delays could improve travel speeds throughout the multi-decade timeline of implementation.

9. Development of Capital and Operations & Maintenance Cost Estimate

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.

One attendee asked whether the study team had determined a specific year's projected dollar value to base the cost estimates on, due to the longevity of the timeline. The study team responded that they have not selected a year and have considered various options using a flexible modeling structure.

Another attendee asked if the study team had factored in additional capacity needs for maintenance locations in their cost estimates. Additionally, another attendee asked the study team if they had considered the cost of new maintenance facilities that may be needed due to Amtrak's current efforts at long-distance equipment procurement. The study team responded that the main consideration for new facility cost estimates are new stations and new maintenance facilities where none exist for terminals of preferred routes. The study team has coordinated with Amtrak to understand the necessity of new facilities to inform the order of magnitude capital cost estimating. Only a high-level consideration of new maintenance facility costs will be included in the report.

An attendee asked whether the study team will make any attempts to estimate revenue, in addition to costs. The team responded that revenue projections will be included as part of the public benefits analysis, which they will present at the next working group meeting.

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 Northeast working group participants viewed "public and rider benefits" and "complexity in development and implementation" to be the two most important categories to consider when prioritizing implementation of routes.

One attendee wrote "quick wins" on a sticky note, explaining that it will be very important for public approval that people are given the chance to see the potential of passenger rail travel early on. Another attendee also stressed the importance of prioritizing "catalyst projects" that would bolster public support.

Another attendee said that one consideration the team could make during their prioritization stage would be to take advantage of current local projects that could synchronize well with passenger rail.

One attendee also suggested that while prioritizing the team considers the local connectivity of service areas that have hospitals, national parks, universities, etc., to ensure that, once a station is built, there are local networks that can connect passengers to where they need to go.

Multiple participants also discussed quantifying the level of government subsidies for each route, to have a better idea of what the "cost per passenger mile" would be. This metric could be used for prioritization.

During the presentation of a potential implementation timeline, an attendee expressed concern that the timeline would be viewed as too long, and that not having any projects implemented until 2040 could be detrimental to the political success of the network. The study team said that they recognize the challenge with the timeline framework and asked the working group to provide feedback on how to make the implementation take less time. An attendee noted that many of the obstacles are policy-based, and that there could be opportunities for lobbying for reauthorization to shorten the timeline. Another attendee noted that another big obstacle is equipment availability. They also suggested that Corridor ID recipients could integrate their improvements with

federal long-distance improvements. A fourth attendee added that, due to the projects already being built in rights-of-way, there could be a possibility of streamlining the National Environmental Protection Act process within federal agencies.

Outcomes 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 said that they strongly endorse the idea, and that the committee can exist beyond the political turnover that happens on a state or federal level. They also noted that a committee that embraces a long-term vision, similar to the Southern Rail Commission and State-Amtrak Intercity Passenger Rail Committee, will lend strength to what will be a multi-decades long process.

Another attendee asked if the potential committee would provide oversight on the planning process, or if that would be executed by another entity. The study team responded that the committee could discuss and provide feedback on current service, marketing, local experiences, and rider experience. The team noted that the committee's purpose is still in the discussion and development phase. The attendee also suggested that the selection of committee members be approached with equity in mind so that a diverse range of stakeholders have a seat at the table.

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.

One attendee asked if the planning process would generate a pipeline or inventory of upcoming projects. The team responded yes, and that the outcome of the planning process could be similar to state transportation improvement programs. The attendee also suggested that the planning process be ongoing to not cause a rush to update every five years.

Another attendee suggested that long-distance rail projects be required to be included in state and MPO transportation improvement programs. They noted that because current transportation improvement programs do not include Amtrak or FRA projects, it's hard to get any information on rail planning. Another attendee commented that this might be difficult to achieve on an MPO level, because the projects are inter-city. The study team noted that it may be a good idea for FRA to provide states with information to include in their state rail plans instead. An attendee shared that the framework for a process that integrates federally funded projects into state or local planning processes already exists.

An attendee said they applaud the idea for a recurring planning process due to the visibility it provides and the political momentum that a consistent, foregrounded process will provide for rail projects.

12. Conclusion

The 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,

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presentation of the implementation schedules for the preferred routes, and presentation of the recommended actions of the study.

Attendees

- American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials
- Amtrak
- Baltimore Metropolitan Council
- Connecticut Department of Transportation
- DC Department of Transportation
- Empire State Passengers Association
- FRA
- Greater Buffalo and Niagara Regional Transportation Council
- Greater Portland Council of Governments
- National Park Service
- 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
- Port Authority of New York and New Jersey
- Rail Passengers Association
- Rhode Island Division of Statewide Planning
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority
- Wilmington Area Planning Council