

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

Date: February 13, 2024, 9 am - 4 pm Central Time

Location: Mid-America Regional Council, 600 Broadway Boulevard., Suite 200, Kansas City, MO 64105

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 Central regional meeting taking place on February 13. 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 Kansas City, Missouri, 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
- 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 Central regional working group meeting and an overview of meeting attendee feedback and conversations that occurred throughout the day.

2. Welcome and Introductions

The Central 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 Central Region Regional Working Group Meeting 3 on February 13 in Kansas City, Missouri



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 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. 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.

6. Discussion of Route Identification

During the presentation of the identified routes, the working group discussed and provided feedback on the routes presented.

An attendee asked if there would be extra capacity on the Denver-Houston route considering Texas is decommissioning their coal power plants, thereby creating less traffic. A study team member responded that they are not currently looking at capacity, and it could be looked at in later studies.

An attendee commended the team for expanding access to the network and Corridor ID programs. Another attendee commented that they are excited for the Phoenix-Minneapolis/St. Paul route as it is more time efficient compared to previous routes and allows access to more places.

One attendee asked how much consideration could be given to one of the other segments for the alignment of the Dallas/Ft. Worth-New York route. A member of the study team responded that each segment was considered for inclusion in a route option as preferred routes were developed, and that route options may be reviewed as future studies are developed. The same attendee then noted that one of the alternative route options would be a better choice, as there is existing infrastructure in place.

An attendee commented that it is important to think about how the proposed long-distance routes will layer with state-supported services to create a cohesive network. It is important to contextualize other national transportation investments over a similar timescale when proposing new long-distance routes to Congress.

An attendee added that the route endpoints are great, but rural connectivity through the middle of these routes is important as they provide equal access to transportation. The attendee noted that including Kansas City on the Minneapolis/St. Paul route is helpful for people not traveling through hubs such as Chicago. A member of the study team responded that stops not presently identified on the map will help build a coherent and efficient network and connect those rural communities. Another attendee suggested FRA working groups could provide stories from current and future riders who live in rural areas and regions about how connecting not only to other cities would be beneficial, but also to other regions.

One attendee suggested that connectivity to megaregions should be considered. Another attendee added that looking at megaregions and focusing on areas with high congestion can help address transportation crises. A member of the study team responded that the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and FRA have led some recent megaregional planning efforts and regional rail studies. An attendee added that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and Virginia Tech have also conducted studies on the concept of megaregions.

An attendee commented that giving people options to travel when they cannot fly, drive, or take a bus is important. A member of the study team responded that easier and increased access to transportation can lead to a better quality of life. The rationale behind the route development included geographic coverage and access for transportation and health disadvantaged populations, not just travel demand. The intention was for these routes to be seen as a complete network, not just individual links. The same attendee added access to transportation is an equality issue that also affects housing, health, and education. Another attendee commented 26% of long-distance ridership qualifies as disabled. It is important for people who cannot travel via airplane to know they have transportation options.

7. 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 added that there should be aspirations to have better on-time performance than the current system. A member of the study team responded that they took a conservative approach in calculating estimated travel time. The travel times reflect actual Amtrak schedules, not on-time performance or potential future traffic conditions. Further studies may look at schedules in more detail with the host railroads' involvement, considering capacity and on-time performance.

Another attendee asked if the study team used advanced ridership projections, in addition to speed and reliability projections, during development of route service. A member of the study team clarified that travel demand data, based on the FHWA Next-Gen Travel Survey data, were considered in the identification of preferred routes. An attendee asked if the team had already discussed why Monterrey, Mexico, Corpus Christi, and Rio Grande Valley were not on the network map. The study team responded that they are not considering international routes as part of the study.

8. 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 mentioned the cost of new rural routes and at-grade-crossings are something that will need to be considered with regards to safety.

Another attendee asked if the cost estimates would include the costs of increased frequency of service. A member of the study team said the cost estimates would be based on one daily trip in each direction.

An attendee asked how the team allocated costs for a station that would be a terminal for two routes. A member of the study team said the costs could be allocated proportionally. Costs may be reported for each preferred route and system wide. It is something that the study team will consider further.

Another attendee asked about the reasoning behind new proposed routes following the same pattern of onboard service offerings as the existing routes. A member of the study team replied that it is just a starting point for estimating costs. The team is looking forward to the next 20 to 30 years when these routes may be put into service, but also must look at how things are operating today as a basis for costs. An attendee also pointed out the restriction the team faced in not having real world operating costs for new long-distance equipment.

Another attendee commented that this planning effort is just the beginning and shouldn't preclude any options that may be necessary to consider in the future. A study team member said that this study is the beginning of a planning process. What is being produced will be subject to further review with planning and engineering as part of future studies.

9. 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 Central working group participants viewed “complexity in development and implementation” and “consistency with intercity passenger rail projects” to be the two most important categories to consider when prioritizing implementation of routes.

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

10. 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 asked if this new committee would be similar to the Surface Transportation Board’s Passenger Rail Advisory Committee (PRAC). A member of the study team responded that the proposed Long-Distance Public Committee would be separate from the PRAC, with a broader focus on long-distance communities and states. Another attendee asked if the committee would be a part of the FRA or DOT. A member of the study team said the committee could function like the State-Amtrak Intercity Passenger Rail Committee (SAIPRC) or Northeast Corridor Commission, independent from FRA. However, FRA could be a member of the committee.

An attendee suggested that the committee should have reimbursable expenses if it wants the full breadth of public participation, which could include non-profits. Another attendee suggested looking at the work of the Texas Eagle Marketing and Performance Organization, with the formation of a national long-distance-related committee.

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 commented that the idea of a national plan would be the right approach because long-distance routes are not state supported. Another attendee asked if this high-level long-distance planning process would be similar to SAIPRC. A member of the study team responded that while there could be some overlap, this could potentially be more of a planning process. It would yield the planning document every five years that could be submitted to Congress, documenting the needs and potentially the cost of addressing those needs of the long-distance rail network.

An attendee asked the study team if they are engaging riders in plans like these, and to make sure constituents are part of the process. A member of the study team responded FRA is open to hearing ideas for best practices for rider and public engagement.

11. Conclusion

The Central 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

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

Attendees

- Alamo Area Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Amtrak
- Arkansas Department of Transportation
- Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Central Mississippi Planning and Development District
- Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma
- City of Ponca City
- FRA
- I-20 Corridor Council
- Kansas Legislative Passenger Rail Caucus
- Northland Flyer Alliance
- Oklahoma Department of Transportation
- Rail Passengers Association
- Texas Department of Transportation
- Texas Rail Advocates
- Wichita Metropolitan Planning Organization