

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study Northeast Regional Working Group Meeting 4

Date: June 4, 2024, 10 am - 4 pm EDT

Location: Amtrak Moynihan Train Hall – 383 West 31st Street B, New York, NY 10001

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.

Previously, FRA hosted three rounds of regional working group meetings across the United States, in six separate regions, to engage these stakeholders. The fourth and final round of meetings were held in June 2024, with the Northeast regional meeting taking place on June 4. The purpose of this round of meetings was to review and discuss analyses associated with each of the preferred routes, including conceptual service schedules, high-level capital and operating and maintenance (O&M) cost estimate ranges, and public benefits analysis. Additionally, the meetings aimed to create a shared understanding of next steps for the study.

The meeting was held both in person in New York, New York, 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 and What We've Heard
- Network Development and Methods and Tools for Network Assessment
- Preferred Route Analysis
- Prioritization
- Ongoing Long-Distance Collaboration and Planning
- Conclusion

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 review of housekeeping and safety information. Next, in-person and virtual attendees introduced themselves. Regional working group members in attendance, both in-person and virtually, are listed at the end of this summary. FRA then delivered opening remarks, which provided attendees with an orientation toward the day's presentation and discussions. Amtrak also provided opening remarks.

Figure 1. Participants at the Northeast Regional Working Group Meeting 4 on June 4 in New York, New York



3. Study Overview & What We've Heard

The study team began by providing meeting attendees with the legislative direction for the study, including requirements for a report to Congress, as well as an overview of current long-distance service and intercity passenger rail funding programs, and the overall study scope and approach.

The study team also reviewed feedback received during and after the third round of regional working group meetings in February 2024. Between February 6 and March 11, 2024, more than 47,000 public and stakeholder comments were received – primarily via the study website and email address. Artificial intelligence (AI) was used to analyze the comments and identify preferred routes and geographies (cities, states) mentioned.

Key stakeholder and public comment takeaways:

- 99% of comments were supportive of long-distance passenger rail in the United States
- 23% of comments simply offered support for passenger rail
- Some cities that are not included on a preferred route generated many comments and support for consideration (these cities were discussed later in the presentation)

Further information pertaining to stakeholder and public feedback may be viewed in the working group presentation on the project website – www.fralongdistancerailstudy.org/meeting-materials.

Two attendees asked FRA whether the comments were all unique, as opposed to form letters or automated entries. The study team responded that there was little evidence of identical comments or bot-written responses.

4. Network Development & Methods and Tools for Network Assessment

The study team gave an overview of the approach to developing the preferred routes. This began with a review of the existing passenger rail network, as well as the baseline network identified for the study. Next, the study team reviewed the conceptual enhanced network (presented in-depth at regional working group meetings in July 2023), as well as the preferred routes developed from the conceptual enhanced network (first presented at regional working group meetings in February 2024). Daily Cardinal and Sunset Limited passenger rail service was assumed when identifying the preferred routes.

The study team then reviewed the methodology and tools used to evaluate the preferred routes, including the development of conceptual service schedules, network analysis, cost estimates for O&M costs and selected passenger-service required projects, and public benefits analysis.

One attendee asked the study team to explain what their methodology was for quantifying “improved travel time.” The study team responded that improved travel time was calculated by comparing passenger rail travel times between station pairs from the baseline network to travel times between station pairs from the preferred routes. Improvements in travel time would be achieved where the travel time between station pairs was shortened with the preferred routes. For example, the travel time between the station pairs Chicago and Miami would be shorter for the preferred routes compared to the baseline network.

An attendee asked whether the potential travel time improvements were based on an analysis of each individual route, or all 15 routes together. The study team responded that for travel time improvements, the 15 routes were analyzed together. The attendee also pointed out that creating conceptual schedules at such an early point in the process can be misleading and that the schedules were developed for analysis purposes only.

In the context of cost estimates, an attendee noted that the analysis does not incorporate the cost reductions that may occur if train equipment is upgraded to be faster.

Another attendee asked the study team why the cost methodology included an unallocated contingency of 30 percent, when many other cost estimates use a 10 percent unallocated contingency. The study team responded that the capital cost estimates are order of magnitude cost estimates to support early project planning. The level of detail for estimating and analysis for the study is conceptual and high-level, which allowed for a higher amount of unallocated contingency to estimate a range of capital costs.

During the presentation of the public benefits methodology, the study team included the approach used to quantify National Park Service accessibility. For the purposes of the study, National Park Service land was quantified just as national parks, recreation areas, and preserves within 100 miles of a station. The study team noted that there are several ways to measure access to National Parks, and the limitations to the analysis would be acknowledged within the report to Congress.

During the presentation of the public benefits methodology, an attendee asked whether the “jobs and earnings” public benefit referred to jobs just within Amtrak, or jobs within local communities served by routes. The study team responded that the analysis covers both direct and indirect jobs and earnings. This included calculations of the potential jobs supported and earnings created by rail construction projects, in addition to jobs supported and earnings created by ongoing operations.

Another attendee asked about the safety benefit evaluation, and the team’s approach to calculating that benefit. The study team responded that the methodology included using NextGen travel demand data to help identify the potential number of crashes avoided by shifting passengers from auto/bus to rail.

5. Preferred Route Analysis

The study team presented the results of the preferred routes analysis, starting with an overview of increasing the Cardinal and Sunset Limited to daily service. The study team then reviewed the results of conceptual service schedules, cost estimates, and public benefits analysis for each preferred route. These results were organized into a conceptual service overview; a review of equity and accessibility; a review of cost estimate ranges; and a review of safety, jobs, and earnings.

During the presentation of the Chicago – Miami preferred route analysis, an attendee asked whether there had been a cost-sharing calculation made for the segments of the routes that connect with one another. The study team responded that the cost estimate ranges presented for each route do not factor in the overlapping segments where costs would be shared between multiple routes.

During the presentation of the Dallas/Fort Worth – Miami preferred route analysis, another attendee inquired how the route got the most public comments. The attendee asked whether the comments that referenced the route were primarily supportive. FRA responded that the comments received related to the Dallas/Fort Worth – Miami preferred route were mostly in favor of the route. Another attendee suggested that the volume of comments about the Dallas/Fort Worth – Miami preferred route could relate to the discontinuation of regional service that occurred after Hurricane Katrina. The same attendee asked why the study team had not offered ballpark figures for ridership per mile or passenger estimates. The study team responded that high-level demand between metropolitan areas was primarily used as inputs for other analyses. The attendee noted that ridership estimates may be important figures to sell the idea of long-distance passenger rail to the public.

During the presentation of the Los Angeles – Denver preferred route analysis, one attendee asked whether the route would utilize the privately-run Brightline West trackage that is currently under construction. The study team responded that the route would only utilize the existing North American Rail Network.

After presenting analyses of each preferred route the study team gave an overview of the potential network hubs that could be developed if the complete network was implemented.

Then, the study team identified cities not included on a preferred route that generated many comments after the last round of regional working group meetings in February 2024, and noted the opportunities and challenges of adding new markets to the preferred network. For the Northeast region, these markets included Boston and Buffalo. One attendee mentioned that Buffalo's station will soon have the infrastructure to become a terminal station, and that people in that region are highly interested in increased international service to Toronto.

Results of the preferred route analyses are available in the [presentation](#).

6. Prioritization

Next, the study team presented on the methodology to prioritize the preferred routes. This early, initial assessment of the preferred routes was based on three evaluation categories: complexity, benefits, and selected costs. The study team gave an overview of the various metrics evaluated for the study, and how they were weighted. Daily Cardinal, daily Sunset Limited, and Seattle – Chicago routes were not included in prioritization because they are included in FRA's [Corridor ID Program](#). The study team noted the results of this prioritization exercise may provide guidance on future priorities regarding the next phase of project planning, but that these initial ratings do not reflect prioritization for implementation funding.

After presenting prioritization, the study team gave an overview of the FRA project lifecycle and program framework as a reminder of the steps involved in developing and implementing railroad capital projects. The study is a systems planning effort that would help to inform and initiate project planning requirements. The study team emphasized that significantly more project planning would be necessary to advance recommendations from the study.

Next, the study team presented implementation considerations, including key considerations for implementing the preferred routes. These considerations include:

- Funding and preparation of a service development plan
- Industry capacity to plan and implement a new long-distance route
- Coordinating and agreement with the host railroads and passenger rail service operators
- Funding and acquisition of fleet
- Funding for construction
- Sustained funding for operations

One attendee pointed out that the funding and acquisition of the fleet would need to happen very early in the timeline of implementation. Another attendee echoed this viewpoint, noting that the industry may not have the capacity to efficiently build the necessary equipment.

The study team presented key project planning tasks that would need to occur after the study is finalized, as part of a service development plan process. The team emphasized that the study is a very early step in the process of planning, developing, and implementing an expanded long-distance rail network.

7. Ongoing Long-Distance Collaboration and Planning

Next, FRA presented opportunities and ideas for ongoing long-distance collaboration and planning, including ideas for a new Long-Distance Public Committee, as well as a high-level, recurring long-distance planning process that could be similar to State Rail Plans or other comparable transportation investment plans.

One attendee advocated for an every-five-year review process that would allow stakeholders to review the state of long-distance passenger rail and propose changes in strategy or planning. Another attendee suggested that the timeline of 15 to 20 years for implementation of new long-distance routes could become problematic, because public and political support could decline with a long timeline. A third attendee was concerned that the public may grow frustrated by long implementation timelines. The attendee added that garnering public support for rail funding may not be effective if long-distance passenger service was promised, but not delivered to some communities for over a decade.

An attendee noted that a new Long-Distance Public Committee could slow down progress without a specific focus to guide members. The attendee emphasized that if the group is too large, or too unfocused, it could hinder the development of a network. Another attendee mentioned the idea of convening the members of the current regional working groups periodically as a guiding body.

During discussion of ongoing planning, one attendee suggested the terms of the Corridor ID program could be changed to include the implementation of long-distance routes and be redesigned to include long-distance projects. Another attendee that FRA must focus on implementation strategies in their recommendations to Congress and help Congress understand how these routes could realistically be implemented.

8. Conclusion

The regional working group meeting concluded with a review of the study's next steps. The next and final step of the study is the preparation and submittal of the report to Congress, which will happen later in 2024.

The study team noted that the study presents both opportunities and challenges for the advancement of long-distance passenger rail, which will be included as part of the report to Congress.

Attendees

- American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials
- Amtrak

Northeast Regional Working Group Meeting 4

- Baltimore Metropolitan Council
- CSX
- Connecticut Department of Transportation
- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission
- District Department of Transportation
- Empire State Passengers Association
- Greater Portland Council of Governments
- National Park Service
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation
- Rail Passengers Association
- Rhode Island Division of Statewide Planning
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority
- Wilmington Area Planning Council