

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

**Date:** June 11, 2024, 9 am - 4 pm PDT

**Location:** City of Las Vegas International Innovation Center – 300 South 4th Street (Suite 180), Las Vegas, NV 89101

## 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 Southwest regional meeting taking place on June 11. 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 Las Vegas, Nevada, 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 Southwest regional working group meeting and an overview of meeting attendee feedback and conversations that occurred throughout the day.

## 2. Welcome and Introductions

The Southwest 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 Southwest Regional Working Group Meeting 4 on June 11 in Las Vegas, Nevada**



### 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](http://www.fralongdistancerailstudy.org/meeting-materials).

### 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 proposed network, 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.

Two attendees discussed the uncertainty of aspects of the cost-estimating process, noting that it would be challenging to implement long-distance projects in a “piecemeal” way without having funding secured for all of the projects required to implement a preferred route.

The study team acknowledged this obstacle and noted that a funding structure would be one of the most challenging elements of executing a long-distance network; since the creation of Amtrak, there has been very little attention paid to the creation of a rail network, which means implementing 750 mile or longer routes in an efficient way would prove to be a major challenge. The study team also referred attendees to available guidance related to [FRA’s lifecycle stages](#).

Two attendees mentioned that host railroads and track capacities will play a significant role in implementing the network. One attendee asked whether it would be possible to develop a map that showed estimated available rail capacity. The study team responded that they did not include traffic conditions at this stage but that a route’s service development plan could.

One attendee was concerned that 35 percent allocated contingency was high. The study team confirmed that, for a high-level order of magnitude capital cost, 35 percent is typical. The attendee also had a question about the consist estimates used. The study team confirmed that they worked closely with Amtrak to develop consist estimates and that they were conservative. They also acknowledged that the 25 percent spare ratio was high for brand new equipment but provided robust trainsets for the preferred routes.

## 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 Denver – Houston preferred route, an attendee asked whether accessibility to institutions like universities, military installations, or medical centers was identified broadly as a feature of the entire interconnected network, or if institutional access was determined on a route-by-route basis. The study team responded that for this analysis institutional access metrics were evaluated on a route-by-route basis. In previous working group meetings, the study team had presented some institutional access metrics on a network-wide scale. One attendee asked whether vehicle mile reductions or medical bills saved from crashes averted had been monetized. The study team clarified that crashes avoided, and vehicle miles traveled (VMT) reductions had not been monetized.

During the presentation of the San Francisco – Dallas/Fort Worth preferred route, an attendee asked whether the track upgrades around the Phoenix, Arizona, area were being counted toward the total cost of the route, or if these costs were excluded because of the Sunset Limited route’s existing infrastructure update plan. The study team responded that selected high-level capital cost estimates associated with Phoenix-area track upgrades were included in cost models for San Francisco – Dallas/Fort Worth.

One attendee noted that the estimates for medical center accessibility should be a factor in the expanded populations of people that would be able to reach medical treatment more easily if the preferred routes were implemented. This analysis would go beyond considering just medical center access but would also highlight the likely influx of patients with new access to medical centers. The same attendee also suggested that the study

team should consider discussing the benefits of providing bus connections between stations and nearby tribal reservations to increase rail access for Native Americans.

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 Southwest region, these markets included San Diego.

As the study team presented on the opportunities and challenges of adding specific markets to the Southwest region, one attendee said that in San Diego there are unique challenges related to track erosion that could raise costs.

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.

An attendee suggested that when calculating level of benefit, existing stations should receive more attention as well as routes that are known to have local support behind them. The attendee also requested that the study note suggestions for improving the routes at the bottom of the list of the prioritized routes. The study team responded that the methodology identified shared, existing infrastructure as part of the level of benefit category. To incorporate local support, the stakeholder feedback was a factor in identifying the new segments in the enhanced network as well as developing the preferred routes. For the routes with lower prioritization scores, the study team proposed that potential improvements could be acknowledged in the section on challenges and opportunities for the preferred routes.

An attendee asked the study team to clarify their methodology for calculating level of benefit, specifically how they were able to make these calculations without ridership information. The study team responded that the methodology included using NextGen travel demand data to estimate high-level demand between metropolitan areas to identify the potential number of crashes avoided by shifting passengers from auto/bus to rail, for example.

Another attendee asked whether the study team could provide stakeholders with the cost estimates for segments that are part of routes. The study team responded that they would be publishing technical findings; however, at this point in the project lifecycle, it was not appropriate to complete value engineering calculations at a segment-by-segment basis. Another attendee said that it was not possible to know which segments were most expensive without identifying necessary capacity improvement projects.

One attendee suggested that the study team include data that measures vehicle miles diverted as well as capital cost per route mile to demonstrate which routes were diverting more traffic. Another attendee suggested that the study team should consider historical support and past rail access to regions. The attendee noted that there may be potential support for some routes that may not be immediately clear but will be once service is implemented.

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

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. During this discussion, an attendee asked the study team whether a future task would include comparing the economics of new ridership to the estimated O&M cost. The study team responded that the scope of the study did not include this kind of cost-benefit analysis, and that robust public cost-benefit analyses could be part of a future study. The same attendee suggested there was a gap in the timeframe between procurement of long-distance rail, and the production of the required equipment to implement these routes. The study team responded that current plans for vehicle procurement is only for the replacement of existing equipment, and that funding has not yet been secured for new routes. Another attendee said that equipment procurement could begin before decisions were made about which routes would move forward. The attendee noted that the stakeholders involved in the study were in a position to help secure funding. They suggested that the implementation timeline could be made more reliable if a fleet of equipment was proactively procured.

## 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 recommended that a federal group or committee should have a formally outlined mission to keep the discussion focused and on topic. The attendee also emphasized the necessity of strong funding and staffing for such an entity.

## 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

- All Aboard Arizona
- Amtrak
- Arizona Department of Transportation
- Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments
- Colorado Department of Transportation

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- Maricopa Association of Governments
- Morongo Band of Mission Indians
- New Mexico Department of Transportation
- Rail Passenger Association of California and Nevada
- Rail Passengers Association
- Regional Transportation Commission of Northern Nevada
- Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada
- Utah Department of Transportation
- Utah Rail Passengers Association