

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

Date: June 12, 2024, 10 am – 4 pm CDT

Location: J. Erik Jonsson Central Library – 1515 Young Street, Dallas, TX 75201

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 Central regional meeting taking place on June 12. 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 Dallas, Texas, 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
- On-going Long-Distance Collaboration and Planning
- Conclusion

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 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 Central Regional Working Group Meeting 4 on June 12 in Dallas, Texas



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.

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.

An attendee asked why the Cardinal would need two additional trainsets to run on a daily basis. A member of the study team replied that two trainsets are in service today. An additional trainset would be required to provide daily service, plus a spare trainset.

An attendee asked whether proposals for restoring former long-distance routes that were not on the preferred route map would be considered. A member of the study team responded that Congress determined the requirements for this study, including the legislative considerations used to guide the development of preferred routes. The next steps following this study would likely be a service development planning process where the analysis could be more detailed and further defined. Some of the long-distance routes identified as part of the study may be eligible for the [Corridor Identification and Development Program](#) (Corridor ID), which would include adding frequencies to existing long-distance routes and restoring service on discontinued Amtrak route. The same attendee asked how proposals for restoration of actual former long-distance routes should be submitted. A member of the study team shared the next funding opportunity for Corridor ID would likely be in FY 2025.

The same attendee noted that cost comparisons for discontinued long-distance routes should be analyzed against the preferred route estimates, in the interest of a fair cost-benefit analysis. The attendee believed that more of the routes discontinued since 1971 (one of the criteria outlined in Section 22214) should be included. A member of the study team replied that places that previously had long-distance service, but no longer do today, were the focus. Many of the discontinued long-distance routes have portions of their routes still in service today, but via a different route. The study team was focused on restoring the portions of discontinued routes that once had long-distance service, but no longer do today – and the study team also estimated the miles of restored routes in 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.

An attendee asked when the study team would involve local MPOs and cities to prepare for development, new infrastructure, and implementation. A member of the study team replied that before this step, further analysis for each route was needed to finalize alignments and determine all capital costs.

Another attendee felt there were some connections left out of the preferred routes such as New Orleans, Louisiana, to Kansas City, Missouri, with a connection at Centralia, Illinois. The attendee referred to the former connection between New Orleans, Louisiana, and what is now the Missouri River Runner, from St. Louis to Kansas City, Missouri, that stopped service in the late 1990s.

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.

An attendee asked if the study team met with Class I or short line railroads to discuss future passenger rail routes. A member of the study team confirmed that the six Class I railroads had been briefed throughout the study and invited to the regional working group meetings, and that short line railroads had been briefed as well. The study team acknowledged that significantly more coordination and engagement would be necessary if the preferred routes move toward implementation.

An attendee asked for clarification on how many of the preferred routes were part of the Corridor ID Program. The study team shared that the study team is looking at two non-daily long-distance routes (Cardinal and Sunset Limited) that align with the Corridor ID program requirements. Additionally, the restoration of the Seattle-Chicago preferred route aligns with the Corridor ID program requirements.

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 Central region, the market included was Little Rock, Arkansas.

An attendee asked if the study team received significant feedback from Tulsa and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, when compared to Little Rock, Arkansas. A member of the study team responded that there was a lot of feedback from Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Dallas. Since these cities were part of at least one of the 15 preferred routes, the study team focused on Little Rock, Arkansas, instead.

An attendee asked if the study team received any suggestions for a different route alignment for Wichita, Kansas. A study team member responded that they received about 50 comments to extend the Heartland Flyer to connect Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and Newton, Kansas, which was selected for Corridor ID in 2023. The study team evaluated route options for the San Antonio-Minneapolis/St. Paul preferred route that would have included direct connections to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and Newton, Kansas.

An attendee asked why Laredo, Texas, was not a part of the study. A member of the study team responded that it was considered as an option on the San Antonio-Minneapolis/St. Paul preferred route. Although Laredo, Texas was not chosen, there is potential for Laredo to be reevaluated for long-distance service in the future.

An attendee asked if a non-preferred long-distance route being proposed for Corridor ID would be relegated to a state-supported or multi-state supported corridor. A member of the study team replied that there are two types of long-distance routes that are eligible for Corridor ID: adding frequencies to an existing long-distance service, and the restoration of a route that used to be operated by Amtrak. The route can also be shorter or longer than 750 miles. The same attendee then asked about the discontinued Lone Star route. A member of the study team replied that Corridor ID eligibility includes restoration of a discontinued Amtrak route.

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 this 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

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.

An attendee asked if a preferred route was accepted into the Corridor ID program, whether the scope, schedule, and budget would need to be developed before proceeding into service development planning. A member of the study team confirmed that the scope, schedule, and budget would still need to be identified before the service development plan process; however, information included in the study might be helpful or applicable, depending on the corridor.

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.

An attendee recommended the Texas Eagle Marketing and Performance Organization (TEMPO) as a model to solicit corridor-specific feedback on the implementation of the preferred routes. The attendee noted that mid-sized and smaller cities would be more active than big cities that may be part of state-supported Amtrak services.

Another attendee stated that TEMPO was a successful model to solicit local engagement and feedback. TEMPO was created by a coalition of mayors in 1993 when the Texas Eagle route was set to be discontinued; the organization aimed to improve performance and provide direct feedback to Amtrak from the grassroots level. Another attendee added that TEMPO members included the Class I railroads' passenger service committees, mayors, and visitors' bureaus, among others. TEMPO also looked at the conveniences that were available to passengers on Amtrak trains, ridership, and revenue management. As a result, according to the attendee, Amtrak saw increased ridership and revenue.

One attendee suggested creating a group to bridge the gap between the national, regional, and local levels of engagement. The attendee suggested this group include local and regional MPOs and chambers of commerce, mayors, and commissioners. Another attendee added state and federal legislators should also be included. Another attendee recommended including councils of government.

An attendee shared that continuity, data-driven analysis, and engagement are the three best practices for long-range planning for state rail plans.

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

- Amtrak
- City of Ponca City
- Heartland Flyer Alliance
- I-20 Corridor Council
- Northern Flyer Alliance
- Oklahoma Department of Transportation

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- Rail Passengers Association
- Texas Rail Advocates
- Wichita Area Metropolitan Planning Organization