

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

Date: June 13, 2024, 9 am - 3 pm CDT

Location: Tennessee Tower – 312 Rosa L Parks Avenue, Nashville, TN 37203

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 Southeast regional meeting taking place on June 13. 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 Nashville, Tennessee, 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 Southeast regional working group meeting and an overview of meeting attendee feedback and conversations that occurred throughout the day.

2. Welcome and Introductions

The Southeast 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 Southeast Regional Working Group Meeting 4 on June 13 in Nashville, Tennessee



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.

As the study team provided an overview of the [Corridor ID Program](#) one attendee asked for the definition of intercity passenger rail. The study team responded that within the United States Department of Transportation, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) administers funds for commuter rail, whereas federal funds for intercity passenger rail (including long-distance) are administered by FRA. Federal law defines commuter rail as “short-haul rail passenger transportation in metropolitan and suburban areas usually having reduced fare, multiple-ride, and commuter tickets and morning and evening peak period operations” (49 USC 24102(3)). The same section of law (49 USC 24102(4)) defines “intercity rail passenger transportation” as “rail passenger transportation except commuter rail passenger transportation.” Anything that is marketed and operated by Amtrak is considered intercity passenger rail.

An attendee asked if any grassroots organizations had applied for Corridor ID. The study team responded eligibility for the program was limited to most public entities, Amtrak, and Federally recognized Indian Tribes. For the first program solicitation, most applications were from state DOTs, with some exceptions, such as passenger rail authorities and cities.

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)

During the discussion of the feedback received during the last round of open public comments, an attendee asked whether the study team had encountered another project with so many public comments. The study team responded that receiving 47,000 comments is rare. The study team also noted that they checked for standardized form letters and duplicate submittals that might account for the large volume of comments. However, there were very few standardized form letters received.

When the study team presented the cities that received the most comments supporting rail service, an attendee asked why Miami was such a popular location for commenters to reference. The study team responded that Miami, Florida is the endpoint for two routes that received a lot of comments: Dallas/Fort Worth – Miami, and Chicago – Miami.

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.

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.

During the overview of methods and tools for network assessment, an attendee asked the study team to define network analysis. The study team responded that the analysis identifies the number of new connections that are provided by the preferred routes, as well as travel time savings.

While the study team presented on the methodology for developing conceptual service schedules, an attendee asked whether the identification of potential station locations included necessary station upgrades or relocations. The attendee noted that the current station in Atlanta, Georgia, is equipped for once-daily service, but would be overwhelmed if more passenger trains were passing through daily. The study team responded that when evaluating existing stations, they identified additional costs that would be required to accommodate the preferred routes for existing stations. Existing stations that are included in the preferred routes would be upgraded to at least a caretaker station (if necessary) to accommodate the addition of the preferred routes. While this estimate includes the assumption of additional infrastructure, it does not include site-specific property acquisition costs.

During the presentation of the public benefits analysis methodology, an attendee asked why the study team did not consider the public benefits analysis to be a benefit-cost analysis. The study team responded that the legislation that directs the study specifically asked for public benefits of the preferred routes. In addition, many of the costs are unknown at this stage. A benefit-cost analysis may be more appropriate in future, more detailed studies of alternatives, not for a vision study or a high-level planning study like this one. The attendee commented that selecting routes that are not proven to be cost-effective will lead to their decline after implementation, and suggested the team ensure benefit-cost analyses are performed before final route selection.

Another attendee asked whether the safety benefits calculations include fatalities and injuries reduced, in addition to crashes avoided. They also asked whether the study team had considered the reduction in airplane or car pollution as part of their public benefits analysis. The study team responded that the safety benefits calculations include reductions in fatal, non-fatal, and property damage crashes, and that they were not able to factor in the air travel market into their calculations due to complexity.

An attendee pointed out, that while the safety estimates accounted for the benefit of a decrease in motor-vehicle crashes, the analysis did not consider the increase in railroad crossing crashes that could occur if trains were passing through communities more frequently.

During the discussion of equity benefits, one attendee asked why the study team included the total additional population served in the equity analysis. The study team responded that while the additional population alone served alone is not an equity benefit, it does provide context for those metrics that were the emphasis for the equity section. This included additional rural populations served, transportation disadvantaged populations served, and additional population on tribal lands served, for example.

An attendee asked whether grade crossing improvements had been considered during the safety benefits analysis. The study team responded that the safety benefits analysis did not include future safety benefits that could be associated with future grade crossing improvements. They also noted that further analysis could be completed in the future to determine the level of safety benefit from this type of rail infrastructure improvement.

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 if the time-saved estimates were calculated by comparing car travel time to the conceptual rail service time. The study team clarified that the time-saving estimates were made by calculating the average change in passenger rail travel time for all station pairs on this preferred route that are also accessible in the baseline network, such as the station pair of Chicago and Miami on the Chicago – Miami preferred route. This station pair is accessible via passenger rail today, with a transfer in New York City or Washington, DC. In the preferred network, this station pair is connected by a one-seat ride (a direct connection) with a shorter passenger rail travel time. This type of analysis was used to help calculate the average travel time-savings estimate for the Chicago - Miami preferred route.

Another attendee commented that the study team's vehicle cost estimates were relatively high, especially because the equipment would be brand new, and spare equipment would be less necessary to purchase. Another attendee echoed this sentiment, noting that Amtrak does not currently have the level of spare equipment that the study team based their calculations on, making the study team's calculations higher than necessary. The attendee also noted that a 25 percent spare ratio would require the creation of storage yards with the capacity for storing spare vehicles. A third attendee offered a different perspective – that the cost estimates include additional marginal costs such as additional costs at existing maintenance facilities. The study team noted that the 25 percent spare ratio was included to provide a conservative cost estimate for each preferred route.

An attendee asked if the Chicago – Miami preferred route could be altered on a state-by-state basis before implementation. The study team responded that the preferred route was chosen out of a set of multiple potential route options based on evaluation criteria, but that in the future, further analysis and planning could allow for changes.

During the presentation of the Dallas/Fort Worth – Atlanta preferred route analysis, an attendee asked the study team why they did not choose to split the current Crescent route. The study team responded that the

legislation that outlined the study did not direct FRA to consider changes in current routes, but rather the restoration of discontinued routes or implementation of new ones. Another attendee commented that it was important to consider the discrepancies between high-level planning, and actual on-the-ground implementation – the attendee noted that, although a split on the Crescent route may look desirable as a plan on paper, the implementation may not work as well as planned.

During the presentation of the Denver – Minneapolis/St. Paul preferred route analysis, an attendee commented that the route would provide service to Wyoming and South Dakota, the only two states in the lower 48 that currently do not have passenger rail service.

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 Southeast region, these markets included Tampa, Florida; Memphis, Tennessee; and Charlotte, North Carolina.

During the discussion of Charlotte, North Carolina, one attendee referenced the city of Danville, Virginia, which would be included on any segment between Charlotte, North Carolina, and Roanoke, Virginia. The attendee noted that Danville, Virginia is an underserved community that has a beautiful train station and deserves daytime service.

One attendee commented that, when compared to larger urban transit systems, the list of preferred rail routes was low-cost in terms of O&M expenses. The attendee noted that, while the routes would cost hundreds of millions of dollars, on a national scale they were relatively cost-efficient.

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 the study team presented the initial rating of preferred routes, an attendee commented that even routes with lower scores should be considered strong routes because they were identified multiple times through several rounds of review.

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 when ridership projections would be calculated and how they would be used in the analysis. The study team responded that ridership was not a focus during prioritization, and that beyond ridership numbers, the emphasis was on accessibility, specifically for rural communities who do not have the populations to inflate ridership numbers.

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 commented that the structure of a long-distance public committee could be similar to current advisory groups at the Rail Passengers Association, who are tasked with monitoring the quality of service on passenger rail routes. They added that if the group was tasked with performing oversight for the implementation of the preferred route network, a commission was likely a better option than a public committee. Another attendee suggested working with an organization such as the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) for external support, instead of taking a federal or congressional pathway to create the group.

Another attendee suggested that the discussion of a long-distance public committee may need to wait until next steps are more clearly outlined. Utilizing a phased approach for creating these groups was suggested by another attendee, such as starting with an advisory group to FRA, followed by a more formal 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

- Amtrak
- Atlanta Regional Commission
- Florida Department of Transportation
- Hampton Roads Transportation Planning Organization
- I-20 Corridor Council
- International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers
- Louisville Metro Government
- Norfolk Southern
- North Carolina Department of Transportation
- Rail Passengers Association
- Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham
- South Carolina Department of Transportation
- Southern Rail Commission

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- Tennessee Department of Transportation
- Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation
- Virginia Passenger Rail Authority