

Higher-Speed Rail Requires Funding for Portland-Vancouver Projects

Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates
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Higher-speed rail in the Cascade corridor depends upon key upgrades in the Portland-Vancouver area and the funding for planning to make it happen. Multi-state planning between Oregon and Washington is vital in order to untangle the growing congestion that will ultimately stall higher-speed passenger trains, according to the Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates.

AORTA leaders today urged the states of Oregon and Washington to apply for available federal funds to accomplish this initial task. Passenger rail promoters Jim Long, AORTA president, and Jim Howell, board member of the nonprofit volunteer group, made the appeal.

They expressed growing concern that public expectations for more frequent, reliable and higher-speed passenger rail service in the Portland/Seattle segment of the Cascade corridor – that reaches from Eugene to Vancouver, B.C. – will be thwarted because of inaction by state authorities in planning and conceptual engineering of the relatively short stretch spanning the Columbia River separating Oregon and Washington.

AORTA board member Jim Howell stated. “Removing the bottleneck at the Columbia River is essential. Developing a basic plan and conceptual engineering of a bypass is a sensible start.”

The conceptual engineering we are recommending would address three key components: (1.) new high level railroad bridges across the Columbia River and Portland Harbor (2) a “flyover” or grade separation from the notorious tangle of tracks known as the North Portland Triangle (3) an elevated passenger platform at Vancouver Station or a new station at grade further north.

Rail studies have long made note of the need for this effort. For example:

In the 2003 *I-5 Rail Capacity Study*, done to analyze freight rail issues for the *Portland/Vancouver I-5 Transportation and Trade Partnership*, the predecessor to the *CRC Task Force* states in the Executive Summary:

“Summary of Intercity Passenger Rail Recommendations
The Bi-State Coordination Committee, through the Rail Forum, should:

1. Coordinate efforts by both states to encourage greater funding at the state and federal levels for additional intercity passenger rail service along the federally designated, Pacific Northwest High Speed Rail Corridor, recognizing the need to ensure compensating capacity to the Private railroads for any loss of freight capacity.

2. Coordinate with the Congressional delegations of both states to encourage passage of pending federal legislation for enhanced funding of High Speed Rail service in the Corridor.
3. Work cooperatively with freight railroads to add capacity to the existing rail lines, where appropriate, to enable additional operation of intercity passenger rail service.
4. Support efforts to add capacity outside the Portland/Vancouver region that will improve train speeds and enable additional intercity passenger rail service.”

In the Washington State 2006 *Long-Range Plan for Amtrak Cascades*, it states on pages 22 and 23 in *Chapter 5: Amtrak Cascades Needed Infrastructure Improvements*:

“Columbia River Bridge (rail milepost 9.61 to 10.14)

The Portland-Spokane route junction at the north end of the Columbia River Bridge has a 10 mph speed restriction. The junction connecting to the Port of Portland at the south end of the Oregon Slough Bridge has a 10 mph speed restriction. The combination of these restrictions greatly reduces the capacity of the two main line tracks. Both junctions are constrained by urban development and cannot be modified to allow higher speeds. Capacity is further limited by the extended time of bridge openings caused by the relatively narrow navigation channel, the need to maneuver through an offset in the navigation channel between the adjacent Interstate 5 Bridge and the railroad bridge, and the slow operation of the swing-type railroad drawbridge.

Construction of an additional bridge (next to the existing bridge) and modification of the existing bridge would provide better movement of traffic and reduce the effect of bridge openings on rail traffic. Capacity and reliability would increase. The estimated construction cost of this project is \$575 million. It is anticipated that funds for this project will be shared between the states of Washington and Oregon, as well as other funding partners.”

“Oregon and Washington have a tremendous opportunity right now to capture federal funds made available by the visionary Obama administration,” Long stated. He pointed out the Federal Railroad Administration is now taking applications for planning corridor improvements that cross state lines. The deadline is May 19, 2010:

http://www.fra.dot.gov/downloads/PubAffairs/2010-07338_PI.pdf

In recent weeks, the focus on higher-speed rail has intensified with the announcement by President Obama on January 28 of distribution to key states of \$8 billion for rail improvements. This includes Washington, receiving \$590 million, and Oregon, \$8 million. Obviously, Oregon did not do the necessary planning in its area of responsibility between Portland and Eugene to warrant much federal stimulus money. Nevertheless it should not dampen the benefits from the upgrades that will soon occur in Washington by not cooperating in fixing the Columbia River Crossing and North Portland Junction bottleneck.

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