

For Amtrak, the Climate Changes With Oil Soaring, Senate Approves Big Spending Boost

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Momentum is growing in Congress to bolster Amtrak and help states expand rail service as lawmakers grow concerned over global warming, transportation gridlock and high oil prices.

In what may signal a reversal of fortune for the nation's intercity passenger-rail network, the Senate yesterday approved a six-year, \$11.4 billion bill that would authorize nearly \$2 billion a year in Amtrak funding, up from roughly \$1.3 billion now. The measure passed by a 70-22 vote.

- **The Bill:** The Senate passed legislation boosting Amtrak funding, as passenger rail is seen as part of the solution for global warming, traffic congestion and high oil prices.
- **The Shift:** The bill changes the Amtrak debate by setting a goal for the passenger railroad to improve train service rather than to achieve financial self-sufficiency.
- **What's Next:** The House is expected to consider an Amtrak bill early next year.

The bulk of the bill's funding would go toward operating expenses and capital projects, but \$1.8 billion would be devoted to paying off debt, and \$1.4 billion would fund a new grant program that would enable states to start rail projects. Amtrak currently has a debt of about \$3.4 billion, much of which is in the form of equipment leases.

In recent years, Amtrak has faced an uncertain financial future and calls for privatization under Republican rule. The last time Congress passed a major Amtrak reauthorization bill, in 1997, Republicans inserted language calling for Amtrak to become self-sufficient or face funding cuts or worse. Amtrak continued to bleed red ink, but drew enough support to survive.

Now, with oil prices at record highs, environmental concerns surging and congestion worsening on highways and in the air, passenger rail is looking to many lawmakers like a viable alternative that deserves federal support.

The Senate bill changes the Amtrak debate by setting a goal for the passenger railroad to improve train service rather than to achieve financial self-sufficiency. In that regard, Amtrak will be held to a standard similar to commuter railroads and transit systems that are expected to deliver a public service while still depending on federal and state funding.

"The Senate bill is quite forthright in expecting Amtrak to run efficiently but not profitably," said Ross Capon, executive director of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, a passenger-train advocacy group in Washington. "It gets past the charade that Amtrak is going to turn a profit."

The Senate bill is expected to be followed by a similar measure in the House. Minnesota Democratic Rep. James Oberstar, chairman of the House transportation committee and an Amtrak supporter, intends to take up a bill early next year, said a committee spokeswoman.

The White House has expressed reservations about the bill's price tag but has stopped short of threatening a veto.

"This is a huge victory for anyone who's tired of sitting in traffic or waiting in airports," said Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D., N.J.), who co-sponsored the bipartisan Senate bill with Republican Sen. Trent Lott of Mississippi. "The funding and improvements in our bill will improve Amtrak and make train travel a more attractive option throughout the country," Mr. Lautenberg said.

The increase in political support comes as Amtrak is gaining favor with consumers. Ridership on its nationwide passenger-rail system is up 6.3% in the year ended Sept. 30 from the previous year. Ridership on the high-speed Acela Express linking Washington, New York and Boston is up 19.6% over the same period.

Even as Acela trains have been operating on time more often this year than last, Amtrak's long-distance passenger trains continue to be plagued by long delays. That's because many run on tracks owned and operated by freight railroads, which are enjoying an uptick in demand.

The Senate bill proposes setting up a mechanism for Amtrak to bring complaints and possibly win damages against railroads that unfairly squeeze passenger service.

To secure Republican support, the Senate bill would strengthen Amtrak's accountability by requiring it to expand its board, overhaul its accounting and regularly measure the performance of its routes. Federal regulators could withhold funds from underperforming routes, and the bill would open two routes to private competition by 2011.

Another provision, calling for a study into restoring service on the "Pioneer Route" between Chicago and Seattle via Salt Lake City, drew the support of Republican Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho.

Amtrak spokesman Cliff Black said Amtrak is particularly interested in the Senate bill's capital-matching plan for states. "Amtrak believes that the development of state corridors is a wave of the future for passenger rail," he said. He added that the bill would put passenger rail on a similar footing to obtain federal capital funds, as highways and mass transit now enjoy.

Many states have moved in recent years to expand intercity passenger-train service as an alternative to congested highways and airports. "This has been the missing link in expanding passenger-rail service throughout the state and the country," said George Weber, acting chief of the Bureau of Railroads for the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Illinois has improved tracks and funded additional Amtrak train service on the Chicago-St. Louis corridor. Mr. Weber said the state needs federal funding to make further improvements to tracks and signals that would increase speeds on the line to 110 miles per hour from 79 mph currently.

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