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Amtrak's defenders cite energy efficiency

Administration wants to cut funds to U.S. rail system by 40 percent

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WASHINGTON — Supporters of federal funding for Amtrak have a new argument: The threat of global warming will be eased if more people ride the train.

Amtrak fans point to growing train ridership, which has increased for five years and topped 25.8 million riders last year on the 22,000-mile route system that goes to more than 500 destinations in 46 states.

They say highway and airway congestion, the rising price of gasoline and the need to curb greenhouse gases make funding passenger rail critical for the federal government.

Passenger rail supporters want Congress to reject President Bush's proposal to cut \$525 million from the current Amtrak subsidy of \$1.325 billion.

The Passenger Rail Working Group, an advisory panel of states, Amtrak and passenger rail advocates, argues that the average intercity passenger train produces 60 percent fewer carbon dioxide emissions per passenger mile than the average auto, and half of the carbon dioxide emissions of an airplane.

'Reducing global warming'

Sen. Joseph R. Biden, D-Del., who is famous on Capitol Hill for his two-hour Amtrak commute weekdays between Washington, D.C., and Delaware, contends that using trains instead of cars has "a gigantic" positive effect on the environment.

Biden, who says he has made more than 7,900 Amtrak round trips between the Capitol and his home, says the federal government has a responsibility to fund the train, which has a significant impact "on the consumption of imported oil and on reducing global warming."

Colin Peppard, transportation policy coordinator for Friends of the Earth, an international nonprofit environmental group, says passenger trains are more energy efficient than cars.

He cites several reasons: They move along straight lines on smooth rails, maintain a steadier speed, carry more people and rely on more efficient diesel engines or electric power.

"By moving more people at the same time using a more efficient source of energy, we can reap large benefits in terms of reducing climate change emissions," Peppard said.

\$800 million budget offer

Watching President Bush ask Congress to slash or eliminate federal funding for Amtrak has become an annual Washington rite that sends railroad aficionados scrambling to lobby Congress to preserve federal aid.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., an Amtrak booster, says the train is a "critical form of infrastructure."

"Without the administration stepping up, it's making it very hard," to find funding for the train, Murray says.

The Bush administration budget proposal for fiscal 2009, starting Oct. 1, is for \$800 million, a 40 percent cut, according to Cliff Black, chief of corporate communications for Amtrak.

He says the funding is "inadequate to operate the national passenger rail system as it is currently configured."

Amtrak will make a formal funding request to Congress later this month.

Foes cite underutilization

Amtrak foes and the Bush administration complain that the train system has failed to become financially self-sufficient and is inefficient because many of the routes are underutilized.

Sen. Judd Gregg, R-N.H., argues that Amtrak should be "reorganized" so that the infrastructure of heavily used lines gets improved, while lightly traveled routes are "terminated."

"The problem with Amtrak is it has a few lines that are viable and others that will never be able to pay for themselves," Gregg says.

Ross B. Capon, executive director of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, a rail advocacy group, predicts that Congress will once again dismiss the Bush administration's budget recommendation about Amtrak.

Capon complains that the Bush administration has never seen the value of trains.

"These guys fly into limousines — they don't understand trains," he says.

Frank Busalacchi, DOT secretary for Wisconsin and chairman of the States for Passenger Rail Coalition, an organization that advocates an expanded passenger train network, says trains would not pollute the environment nearly as much as the automobile.

He says the Bush administration's annual attempts to slash Amtrak funding "should be a Saturday Night Live skit. ... Everybody knows the skit by now because it's been the same thing every year."

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