

Dear Senator Johnson,

3/29/15

I am writing to encourage you to support funding for the Willamette Valley Amtrak Cascades in next biennium. You may remember me from when I worked with Claudia Howells and Ed Immel on the ODOT Passenger Rail and Lewis & Clark Explorer Programs. In the decade since the three of us retired the passenger rail program seems to have stagnated.

Current trends could be quickly reversed with schedule revisions and marketing image changes. Cancelling the current train service would result in a loss of jobs (railroad employees and service personnel), elimination of the existing customer base, a drop in ridership on the corridor Thruway Buses, and a negative impact on Oregon businesses that provide services and products for the trains. It would also cut economic benefits such as tourism and ADA mobility options available to the Willamette Valley cities served.

If the train service goes away, the costs to reinstate it would be significant. The present service holds two slots on the corridor. The infrastructure costs to buy those slots back would probably exceed \$25 million. It would also make the \$10 million Willamette Valley Passenger Rail Plan another waste of taxpayer dollars.

When I was the ODOT Passenger Rail Coordinator, the corridor was run more like a business. The state dollars that supported the service came back as jobs and revenue to businesses. In the past few years the service has been run more like a social engineering project. The most popular train schedule was replaced by a morning "commuter" run out of Portland that has very low ridership. Almost 70% of the Willamette Valley passengers travel beyond Portland. During my tenure we could not even justify a Thruway Bus on this morning schedule.

The morning southbound train should be a continuation of the first train from Seattle. This would extend the economic benefits of the corridor to the Willamette Valley Cities along the route.

Since retirement, I have returned to the corporate sector as a part time consultant. Most of my work is in the tourism industry and includes developing, marketing and managing the European operations for a Michigan firm. This firm has moved millions of dollars out of Oregon on tours in the past decade. I also serve as Vice President of the Salem Keizer Transit Board where my number one priority is to get the buses operating seven days a week.

Passenger rail provides an essential link to the Willamette Valley from the north and east. It also has the potential to handle 15% or more of the I-5 traffic if lower cost capacity improvements are made to the rail infrastructure. Capacity improvements benefit both freight and passenger operations.

Please support this important transportation funding decision to continue this essential service without interruption. If you need more information, please give me a call.

Respectfully yours,

Bob Krebs  
Salem, Oregon  
(503) 375-2821

3-29-15

Dear Senator Johnson,

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to chat about the Willamette Valley Amtrak Cascades train funding dilemma. This is to follow up on our conversation. We both agree that there are things that need to be fixed to make the service work better. Most of these actions could take place in a short period of time and would produce a significant upturn in patronage.

Four considerations for improving Amtrak Cascades performance in Oregon:

1. All train runs should be between the Eugene - Seattle city pairs. If a Willamette Valley train begins or terminates in Portland, it should tie to an immediate train connection to or from the north. Almost 70% of the passengers boarding or detraining at Willamette Valley stations travel through Portland. This is one of the reasons ridership is so low on Trains #503 and #505.
2. The business model should provide for intercity service and not commuter (getting to work) service. Intercity travelers are willing to spend much more to ride than commuters. For example there is no free parking near Portland Union Station. This is a big disincentive to a commuter who must pay daily but not to an intercity traveler. Commuters require a much higher subsidy on all modes.
3. Trains should operate when there is a good demand for travel and times should be convenient. From home to work taking train #503 takes almost twice as long as driving from Portland to Salem. This is a real disincentive for using the service. The average length of a corridor train trip is over 100 miles where travel times are competitive with drive times.
4. The Oregon Amtrak Thruway Buses operating along the corridor should be labeled as such. The "Thruway" trade name is used nationwide on Amtrak's tickets, web page, maps, timetables and brochures. Renaming this bus service P.O.I.N.T., with no marketing budget, makes little sense and confuses passengers who don't connect it with the train service. The buses are also a lost opportunity to promote the train service.

A short term fix to address the low patronage issue could be as easy as replacing train #503, departing Portland at 6:00 am, with a Thruway Bus.

At the same time train #501 could be extended to Eugene, Departing Portland at 11:35 am and replacing Thruway Bus #5501. This would provide a convenient Seattle to Eugene through train. Business travelers from Seattle and other Washington points would have a day and a half in Eugene for work with one overnight. It also offers a tool for developing inbound tourist packages.

Small signs, decals or other markings should be added to the P.O.I.N.T. Buses to identify them as "Amtrak Cascades Thruway Service."

Having worked hard during my tenure at ODOT to make the Willamette Valley Amtrak Cascades service a viable operation which would provide economic benefits to our state, I am saddened by the current way it is being operated. When considering the funding package you have some of the same concerns. However, the program has great potential to provide travel capacity if these problems are addressed quickly. It needs to be funded for the next biennium while the business plan is revised.

I have tried to briefly state my view of the issues. Having been retired from the program for over a decade my ODOT knowledge may be a little dated.

I hope this information assists you with your decision making. I do not plan to attend the Transportation subcommittee meeting tomorrow (March 30) unless you feel I have something more to add.

Respectfully yours,

Bob Krebs  
(503) 375-2821