



Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

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DATE: April 1, 2015

TO: House Committee on Transportation and Economic Development

FROM: Hal Gard, Administrator
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SUBJECT: House Bill 3401, Improving On-Time Performance of Passenger Trains and Freight Trains

INTRODUCTION

Oregon House Bill 3401 directs the Oregon Department of Transportation to study and make recommendations on options to improve on-time performance of passenger rail and options for reducing delays for freight trains. This study includes modernizing dispatch systems and protocols to dispatch to better coordinate passenger trains and freight trains, and identifying infrastructure improvements that will improve on-time performance. ODOT is to consider state and federal laws, rules and regulations. ODOT is to report to the interim committee legislature by November 1, 2015.

BACKGROUND

In addition to other mitigating factors, Oregon's passenger trains often incur delay because of interference caused by other trains that share the same rail route. Riders have expressed frustration over delays and, as a result, some have indicated a refusal to continue to use the passenger rail service.

ODOT is actively working with partners to improve on-time performance by meeting on a bi-weekly basis with Washington State Department of Transportation, Amtrak, BNSF, Union Pacific and other stakeholders to discuss issues and identify solutions. Union Pacific has responded positively to our concerns, and ODOT has seen an improvement in on-time performance since completing a major tie replacement and track surfacing program in February 2015. On-time performance in February was 83% compared to 79.2% in January. In late March on-time performance was tracking above 95% for the entire month.

DISCUSSION

House Bill 3401 directs ODOT to study and make recommendations on options for improving on-time performance of passenger rail and for reducing delays for freight trains. As part of this study ODOT is to examine the feasibility of modernizing dispatch systems and identify infrastructure improvements that will improve on-time performance. This will entail investigation into the types of train dispatching systems available today and how they compare with systems currently used on rail lines in Oregon. ODOT would explore how other states are accomplishing on-time performance goals, including how they may be using third party dispatching and incentives as tools to achieve those goals. Modernized dispatching systems increasingly rely upon computer programs to optimize use of the rail network while incentive agreements, such as employed on the Capitol Corridor in California, reward the host railroad for high levels of on-time performance with monetary bonuses and additional annual capital maintenance funds. ODOT would need to rely upon cooperation from UP, BNSF, Amtrak, and

other stakeholders with respect to learning and evaluating the methodology used in assigning priorities to the movement of trains. Since states lack regulatory oversight due to federal preemption, the way forward is to engage host railroads to explore ways for improving on-time performance through a variety of means, including infrastructure improvements such as adding new sidings for meeting and passing trains.

In 2010 the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) released the results of an audit of service issues affecting Amtrak's Cascades and Coast Starlight routes, both of which had posted poor on-time performance in preceding years. The objective was to identify the source of delays and disruptions and make recommendations for improving passenger train performance. Since the audit on-time performance has improved, and the audit may inform some of the conversations with stakeholders.

House Bill 3401 also directs ODOT to identify infrastructure improvements that will improve on-time performance. ODOT would again engage stakeholders and railroads in conversations to identify those improvements. The agency has work either recently completed or underway that will serve as a starting point in conversations to identify improvements.

ODOT completed an update to the State Rail Plan in September 2014. As part of the process, we conducted a needs assessment for both passenger and freight rail. The freight rail assessment, for example, identified opportunities to increase capacity and eliminate bottlenecks in several ways: sidings and mainline track upgrades, signal system upgrades or other upgrades to increase operating speeds. ODOT has also been engaged in a passenger rail environmental impact study since late 2011 to study options for improved passenger rail service between Eugene-Springfield and Portland. The results of the study will inform where siding locations and lengths would help to improve on-time performance. Both of these efforts will set the stage for conversations about future needs.

In addition, ODOT is currently managing two federally-funded projects for preliminary engineering and environmental work to mitigate two long-recognized bottlenecks on the Cascades rail corridor between Portland Union Station and the Columbia River. One of these projects would replace 10 mph crossover switches at Willbridge (North Portland) with new crossovers permitting trains to use them at 30 mph. The other project would improve train velocities from 10 mph to 30 mph at North Portland Junction and Peninsula Junction in the Rivergate section of Portland. Once through the environmental stages these infrastructure improvements will be ready for competition for federal or state funding. However, since the state of Oregon lacks a source of match money for federal grants, ODOT must rely upon the railroad companies to provide the matching amounts.

SUMMARY

House Bill 3401 requires ODOT to study the feasibility of modernizing dispatch systems and protocols and identification of infrastructure improvements to improve on-time performance by November 1, 2015. ODOT would work with the railroads and stakeholders to make recommendations to improve on-time performance of passenger and freight trains to meet this requirement.