

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF
REINSTATEMENT OF AMTRAK PIONEER PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE
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To: Oregon Joint Committee on Transportation Listening Tour Ontario, OR
Date: August 28,2024

Dear Co-Chairs McClain and Gorsek and committee members,

My wife and I live in Halfway, Oregon and are submitting this written testimony in case I do not get a chance to present at the Ontario Listening session. Today I am carpooling for two hours with two other members of our organization Panhandle for Passenger Rail (P4PR) that has been active since 2019 for the purpose of advocating for reinstatement of the Pioneer Passenger Line. Our organization collected over 325 signatures at that time in support of this. We presented information to the Halfway City council and they passed a resolution in favor of this request. We have also collaborated with AORTA and others over the years and most recently helped with the Baker rail group chaired by Matt Krabacher.

Our community has a huge vested interest in your actions and applaud Senator Gorsek's sponsorship of the amendment to HB 4109 directing ODOT to collaborate with the State of Idaho to apply for assistance from the FRA to study the potential for establishing the Pioneer Rail service to our extended communities. Recent information sent to us suggesting that ODOT was not pushing forward with this does not make us happy and we are determined to make our voices heard. Please do everything in your power to make sure ODOT does indeed do their job. I hope that our testimony and others will give you insight and stories to use to further our cause in this matter.

Our story may be broken down into two different segments. The first during the period between 1980-1988 when our family lived in Halfway and I worked at Pine Eagle School District as an art instructor; the second, from 1989 to the present, when we lived in Wisconsin for 20 years and then retired in 2010 moving back to Halfway.

During those years when the Pioneer Line was running, we would catch the train in Baker City which is one hour away from our house in Halfway. We took trips to Salt Lake City to see our family and to Portland to see friends. After the Pioneer Line was discontinued, when our family used Amtrak we had to drive 3 1/2 hours to Pasco, Washington which required renting a hotel. We would hop the train at 9pm for eastbound trips to Utah, Wisconsin and Illinois and at 5:30am for westbound trips to Portland. Coming home we would roll into Pasco at 5:30am and pick up the car and continue driving home for that 3 1/2 hour final leg. Those were long, memorable rides on Amtrak.

I want to share one particularly unintentional train ride we took around 1988 during our Christmas break from Pine Eagle School as it has left all of us with a remarkable holiday story we like to tell when talking about our enthusiasm for reinstating the Pioneer Line service from Portland to Baker City and beyond to Salt Lake City, Utah.

The holiday break started in the early afternoon on a Wednesday. We had packed our station wagon with presents, a tree and luggage bags for Alice, I and our three kids aged 4, 7 and 10 plus our dog Sparkle. It was a sunny afternoon but it was 25 below zero as we headed to Baker City with the intention of driving through the night to Salt Lake City, Utah to see Alice's family for the 10 day vacation. We were 16 miles out of Baker City when the clutch began to feel very strange. I slowed down and we limped into Baker City around 3:30pm. The sun was setting and it was getting colder as we pulled up to the curb. Strangely, we were in front of the ticket office of the Amtrak Pioneer Line. We looked at each other and said why not. We walked into the office and the agent said something to the effect of "well you just got here in time and the train to Salt Lake will pick you up at 5:30pm. This gave us a little more than an hour to repack, find a place for our dog and the car which turned out to be a total loss. We

phoned a friend and were back a few minutes before the train arrived. We hopped on with our bags, gifts and small tree and settled in for a night ride to Alice's parents house.

About an hour out of Baker City, we hit the Blizzard that lasted all through the night. I remember looking out the window as we comfortably swayed back and forth falling asleep. The snow was blowing so hard it was parallel to the ground. We were warm and it was minus 35 or so. Often, the train was close to I-84 and what a mess that was with trucks and cars moving slowly or in the ditch.

We rolled into Salt Lake City around 8:30 the next morning. It was sunny and we had slept soundly through the night. I know we would have never made it through the storm and would have been lucky to find a place to stay anywhere along that rural country side. Lucky we were to have connected with the Pioneer Line.

That vacation we bought a small used car; and, as we were driving back home through central Idaho, we ran into another snow and ice storm. When we got flagged over by the state police, I stepped out of the car and fell down as the highway had 1 inch of black ice and two trucks jackknifed and several cars in the ditch. Luckily, we had an exit one mile down the road and spent the night in a motel awakening the next morning to a cold sunny day for the two hour ride home to Halfway. Just a brief glimpse of what might have happened had we missed the train.

After the Pioneer Line service was discontinued in 1997, my family used Amtrak primarily as the main transportation during summer visits to Halfway from Milwaukee and Portland to Halfway. We moved back to Halfway when we retired in 2010, and every summer my son and his family choose to use Amtrak rather than fly or drive. They have this process down and look forward to seeing us. Reinstatement of the Pioneer Line would obviously be a welcome change as it would simplify our logistics time wise and financially.

In addition to family visits, having the Amtrak Pioneer Route stop in Baker City, Oregon would greatly help with our transportation options as we get older. In the last five years, our medical needs have increased exponentially. I am 80 and for the last 5 years have been dealing with AFib and Alice is 75 with congestive heart failure. Both of us have our cardiology teams in Boise which means gas, food and lodging. Our primary physician is in Baker City.

This year alone we have travelled to Boise one or two times a month. We are lucky to be able to physically drive; however, my reaction time and eyesight, especially at night, make me nervous and I do not know how much longer I will be able to make the journey. As we have to usually spend the night, In previous years, we have spent upwards of \$4500 a year to make these medical appointments a reality.

Amtrak Pioneer Line reinstatement would be a welcome alternative and maybe the safest for us and others on the roads we travel on between Halfway and Boise.

Thank you for listening to our stories and our brief testimony in hopes that you all will be able to use some of our thoughts to further conversations and make this dream of reinstating the Pioneer Line a reality for all of our families and our many communities along this route.

Wilkes and Alice Covey in Halfway, OR
Peyton, Kilian, Lyla Covey in Milwaukee, WI,
Preston, Kristen and Sami Covey in Portland, OR and
Leona Covey in Salt Lake City, UT
As well as the dozens of relatives living along the way.