

Co-chairs Gorsek and McLain, co-vice chairs Boquist and Boshart Davis:

My name is Doug Allen. I am Portland Area Vice-president of AORTA-Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates, speaking in favor of the HB 4109 -4 amendment.

The Federal Railroad Administration is already studying restoration of discontinued Amtrak routes. The FRA convened a study meeting on Thursday, February 9, in Seattle, where they listed the Pioneer as one of 15 FRA “proposed preferred routes.” The next step in the FRA study will be a recommendation to Congress.

So why is the dash 4 amendment needed?

Well, without strong support at the state level, nothing will drive the restoration process forward. ODOT has participated in the current FRA study, but there is no legislative directive to pursue restoration of the Pioneer. Without that directive, we are totally dependent on Amtrak and future congressional appropriations. That alone offers little hope.

The message from the FRA is that Oregon and Idaho need to apply for the next round of Corridor ID grants. Oregon failed to apply for the last round, and Idaho mistakenly sent their application to the wrong program (see Idaho Statesman article below). Meanwhile, in Montana, the FRA awarded \$500K to the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority to enter Step 1 of the Corridor ID program, to begin preparing a Service Development Plan for restoration of North Coast Hiawatha service, another discontinued Amtrak train.

Let me quote from last year’s FRA notice of funding opportunity: **“The Corridor ID Program is intended to become the primary means for directing Federal financial support and technical assistance toward the development of proposals for new or improved intercity passenger rail services throughout the United States.”**

The positive FRA view of Pioneer restoration means that Oregon and Idaho should be very competitive in the next round of Corridor ID funding, despite our failure to apply last year. Once in the program, Oregon will have priority for subsequent grants to develop a “Service Development Plan” and then actual project development.

In January you heard retired Representative Peter DeFazio and Secretary Ray LaHood urge ODOT to go after the money. Oregon residents need this service. As intercity bus service declines, passenger rail is even more necessary. Ridership on Oregon’s Cascades trains is now above pre-pandemic levels, showing that the public trusts Amtrak to provide a safe and enjoyable ride. The initial Corridor ID grant has zero local match, and later grants require low matches.

The Cascadia Corridor High Speed Rail program in Washington already got a Corridor ID grant, and anticipates priority funding for subsequent stages. And you heard that ultra high speed rail in Oregon will not go beyond Portland. Restoration of the Pioneer route east, along with improved Amtrak Cascades service south, and better connecting intercity bus service, are needed to provide quality travel choices for Oregonians across the state.

Route of the Pioneer: The Pioneer was a passenger train operated by Amtrak between Seattle, Portland and Chicago. It essentially replaced the "City of Portland" train when Amtrak was formed. The route through Oregon served stations in **Portland, Hood River, The Dalles, Hinkle-Hermiston, Pendleton, La Grande, Baker City, and Ontario**, and in Idaho served Nampa, Boise, Shoshone, and Pocatello. Initially it traveled through Ogden, Utah, then through Wyoming to Cheyenne, then south to Denver and east to Chicago. Later it went to Salt Lake City and joined the California Zephyr train through Utah to Colorado and on to Chicago.

Why the Pioneer was discontinued in 1997: Following budget cuts in the 1990's, Amtrak reduced service to three days a week on several routes. Of course ridership dropped significantly, and Amtrak concluded that it would be more efficient to operate seven days a week on fewer routes. The Pioneer was one of the eliminated routes.

Idaho Statesman article:

<https://www.idahostatesman.com/news/local/community/boise/article285024342.html>

Article text:

*It was painful for a coalition of leaders who have pushed to bring a passenger rail line back to Boise to hear, in December, that the federal government rejected Idaho for a grant to study the return of an Amtrak line. The coalition advocating for the Boise-Salt Lake City service had felt the region was well-positioned to receive the \$500,000 grant.*

*What they heard was not what actually happened.*

*Instead, the Boise area missed out on the grant for a much simpler reason: The Idaho Transportation Department failed to apply for it.*

*In March 2023, the Federal Railroad Administration had two grants open online, and an ITD employee accidentally submitted the state's application to the wrong grant portal, John Tomlinson, a spokesperson for ITD, told the Idaho Statesman. ITD's failure to apply was first reported by BoiseDev.*

*"So they didn't even look at it, they just disqualified it based on it not being in the right bucket," Tomlinson said. "A little mistake there on the part of not submitting it correctly."*

*While the grant would have given the region \$500,000 to explore what the costs and infrastructure needs would be to bring back passenger rail between Caldwell and Salt Lake City, obtaining the grant would have made the area potentially eligible for much more money. Federal authorities expect to cover the majority of costs associated with the more detailed planning needed for agencies who received the grant, according to a copy of the grant.*

*U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg announced the winning grantees on Dec. 8, kick-starting early steps of President Joe Biden's \$66 billion investment in passenger trains, which Congress approved.*

*Boise was not mentioned in the department's news release.*

*Boise Mayor Lauren McLean, a leading member of the coalition pushing for trains, after the announcement spoke with the administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration, who indicated there had been a problem with the application, said Bre Brush, McLean's transportation adviser.*

*Tomlinson said ITD officials had a meeting with the same administrator on Dec. 27, when the administrator confirmed that the application had been submitted incorrectly. Tomlinson said his agency did not inform the public about the error because the agency was trying to "figure out what the next steps are."*

*"This was an error and we feel bad, but mistakes happen, we're human," Tomlinson said.*

*Madison Hardy, a spokesperson for Gov. Brad Little, emphasized that the state has not missed out on the opportunity for rail. The state can resubmit its application in the spring, she told the Statesman by email.*

*"Should the federal government approve it, Idaho will not have lost any ground in the potential for a plan to connect Amtrak from Boise to Salt Lake City just because we missed the first opportunity," she said. "Idaho is committed to working with our partners and the federal government in seeking the planning grant funding in the coming months."*

*Julie DeLorenzo, a member of the Idaho Transportation Department's board, told the Statesman she's confident "stop gaps" will be put in place "so that this problem doesn't happen again."*

*'Where did our application go?'*

*Tomlinson said ITD is interested in applying for the grant again, and that officials hope to reinforce that staffers are "making sure they are putting the documents where they need to go" when they apply for grants.*

*Federal officials plan to reopen the same grant in 2025 [changed to likely spring 2024], and a spokesperson for Amtrak, a national passenger railroad company, told the Statesman the company continues to support bringing rail back to the Boise-Salt Lake City corridor. Leaders have yet to select what passenger rail company would provide the train service.*

*Brush, the mayor's adviser who worked closely on the application with a consultant, said the problem with the application was initially confusing, prompting city officials to ask, "Where did our application go?"*

*She said because the region didn't technically apply for the grant it wanted, it will not receive a formal debrief from officials explaining why it was not selected.*

*Brush said the city's hope is to collect the money needed to complete the phase of planning the region missed out on in the next year, so that officials could again apply for the grant when it reopens in 2025.*

*"Of course it's disappointing," Brush said. She added that the city wants to position itself to be able to take advantage of any future funding opportunities, and that the city's work on last year's application has already laid the groundwork for a coalition.*

*"That's not all for nothing," she said.*

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