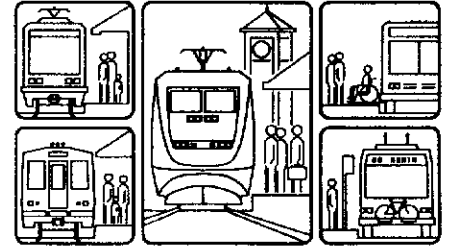


Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates

AORTA

P. O. Box 2772, Portland, Oregon 97208-2772
www.AORTArail.org president@aortarail.org



House Bill 2691 – Testimony in Support. Presented in person at the Hearing on February 21, 2023

When considering the merit of Ultra High-Speed Rail (UHSR) along the Amtrak Cascades Corridor, House Bill 2691 offers a sensible approach. I am retired from ODOT, where I held the job title of *High Speed Rail Project Technician*. During the 1990's there were several groups advocating for UHSR and Maglev Technology. At ODOT it was determined that UHSR would usurp billions in tax dollars for decades before any service was offered. Therefore, the decision was made to upgrade existing services by adding frequencies and reducing travel times.

People become enamored with UHSR without looking at the price tag or the timeline for implementation. They overlook the real reason for investing in passenger rail which is to add capacity in congested highway corridors and provide mobility options.

Incremental improvements to the existing Eugene-Portland rail line could result in a run time of less than two hours. UHSR would shave 15 to 20 minutes off this time, but at about five times the cost in taxpayer dollars while ridership would only increase about 5%. Travel times to destinations using UHSR would probably increase due to stations being located on the outskirts of cities.

Transportation advocates need to stop focusing on how fast trains go and instead look at what is required to sustain an appealing and viable passenger rail service. The following considerations will have much more impact on attracting customers than just speed.

1. On time performance.
2. Reasonable run times between terminals (Not how fast trains operate)
3. Frequency of Service
4. Fares (cost of using the service)
5. Safety and Comfort

These issues can be addressed cost effectively by investment in infrastructure improvements to the existing rail corridor in Oregon and Washington.

In other countries, UHSR lines are developed incrementally as part of a greater rail network. UHSR trains use existing tracks at conventional speeds to access city terminals. They also have connecting services that contribute to patronage. Oregon does not currently have the feeder services needed to support UHSR.

The current push to focus all resources on UHSR does not realistically address the issue. Since the introduction of UHSR around the world, the U.S. has had many proposals. Other than the Amtrak Northeast Corridor, which is primitive compared to other systems, no new routes have emerged.

There is a long timeline to develop UHSR from scratch. For example, the California program was funded by the legislature in 2009. Presently 119 miles of the route are under construction in the Central Valley. Trains are not expected to carry passengers until 2029 at the earliest. When this segment opens transfers will be required at both ends to reach the proposed terminals in San Francisco and Los Angeles. The bus connection from Bakersfield area, over congested freeways, to Los Angeles somewhat defeats the purpose of UHSR.

The logic of investing in existing passenger rail is to provide low-cost capacity improvements to reduce the higher expense of expanding highways. This approach quickly provides services that taxpayers can use, supplements road capacity and has economic benefits. To do nothing until UHSR is here will cost hundreds of millions in road tax dollars. I-5 would require many expensive construction projects to meet growing capacity needs. Older citizens paying the bill for the UHSR project will never see any benefits and will probably be dead before the system opens mid-century. It will also divert highway funds needed in rural areas to deal with road congestion in the Willamette Valley.

ODOT has spent millions on intercity plans that have never been implemented. Even when no-match ARRA federal dollars became available, improvements at Portland Union Station were Oregon's only submitted rail project. Other rail projects that were on the books were ignored. This included the Eugene Station platform and layover track. The Oregon City passing siding project is the first significant passenger rail capacity improvement in almost two decades.

Early in this century passenger rail was seen as a vehicle to add low-cost capacity in the I-5 Corridor. This required adding double track between Eugene and Portland to increase speeds, improve traffic flow and on time performance. The current single track with passing sidings can only handle about four one-way trips per hour. Adding the second track increases the capacity to 12 to 15 one-way trains per hour. It would be easy to add the second track to about eighty rural miles of the line using the existing right-of-way.

Freight rail is the least subsidized mode of transport in Oregon. The freight railroads own the track, signals and other infrastructure rented by the passenger trains. Unlike highways and airports, railroad property is taxed. UHSR would require all new infrastructure for exclusive passenger use. This would remove property from the tax rolls and present taxpayers with a big bill.

According to past passenger rail plans, there should be four to six Amtrak Cascades round trips operating between Eugene and Portland. The third round-trip was slated to be added before 2010. However, infrastructure investments needed to add new schedules have never been made. Now the program limps along with token service that only serves the needs of a limited clientele. I am aware that Covid pandemic and some policy/attitude changes at WS-DOT Rail have put additional burdens on Oregon, but there is still an opportunity to add the third round-trip.

This is why AORTA supports passage of HB 2691 to provide a logical, businesslike approach to passenger rail development in Oregon. It is essential that we plan for and implement services that taxpayers can use rather than continue to spend on "pipe dream" plans that may never materialize.

Robert E. Krebs, AORTA Immediate Past President
Former: Cherriots' Board Director, ODOT Passenger Rail Coordinator and Oregon Business