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Testimony in support of SB14, Tuesday, February 28, 2023

Joint Legislative Transportation Committee

My name is Jon Nuxoll. I am a past president of the Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates and from Eugene. AORTA enthusiastically endorses SB 14.

In 2019 we sponsored a meeting in La Grande to promote restoration of rail passenger service. We were overwhelmed at the response; about 125 people attended the meeting.

It's easy to think of this as a Portland-Boise train, but it would be even more a Hood River-Ontario, or Hermiston-Portland, or Baker City-Boise, or Ontario-Pocatello train. We heard many express the need to see medical specialists in Boise or Portland, and how passenger train service would make that much easier.

There are also fewer and fewer options along that route. Greyhound now runs only one daily Portland-Boise bus ... without even a station, just drop off on a curb, in those cities and most if not all stops along the route. That plus off-and-on air service to Pendleton is the only public transportation along that route.

East-west public transportation across Oregon is no better from my home in Eugene. I took the bus from Eugene to see family in Boise a few years ago. From Eugene, there are two transfers: one in Bend and a second in Ontario. Even though it was summer, my Greyhound connection from Ontario to Boise was delayed without explanation. I was fortunate that my brother could come from Boise to pick me up, but other passengers didn't have that option and needed to wait for hours for the connection.

I would like to suggest, however, that the study proposed in this bill should refer to such as train as part of an "interregional or national network"—current federal terminology—and that it extend beyond Ontario. Limiting a study-bill to service only to Ontario could be an unintended poison pill, as a study of a train terminating there rather than Boise or beyond would be unviable. Moreover, service beyond 750 miles qualifies for federal support.

This is implied by this bill, but the needs of the Union Pacific Railroad also must be taken into account in any study. I'm a Union Pacific stockholder and want UP to do well. I share statements made by other speakers this evening in support of freight as well as passenger rail. In the past three decades, California has made great strides in expanding its passenger-rail system and has worked with the same Union Pacific Railroad ... but that cooperation happened because California came to the table with money to fund the additional capacity UP required to host more passenger trains. And the same point was made last week by Portland and Western officials regarding expansion of WES.

Again, it's great to see this kind of proposal before the Legislature and I strongly urge your support.

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