

Fund Amtrak and keep an eye on it

Sen. Rick Santorum

is a Republican representing Pennsylvania

As our nation's premier passenger rail service, Amtrak plays a crucial role in our transportation infrastructure. Keeping the rail lines open and the trains running should be one of Congress' priorities in the upcoming budget discussion. At a time when Amtrak is setting ridership records and as congestion at our airports and on the highways continues to increase, it would be a grave mistake to cut the federal funds that keep Amtrak operating.

President George W. Bush recently proposed cutting Amtrak funding and would provide \$360 million to maintain existing commuter services along the Northeast Corridor. Without substantial government funds or other intervening action, Amtrak would quickly enter bankruptcy and shut down all of its services, leaving millions of riders and thousands of communities without access to the essential and convenient transportation that Amtrak provides. In addition, it is critical to Pennsylvania's workers, businesses, visitors, and most specifically to the more than 3,000 Amtrak employees that we do not decrease funding for Amtrak.

Commuters rely heavily on

Amtrak's services. Eight commuter railroads operate over Amtrak-owned or operated tracks on the Northeast Corridor. Amtrak's commuter ridership has been growing steadily over the past 10 years. Today there are 1,700 daily commuter trains over the Northeast Corridor, with an average daily ridership of 750,000.

The Northeast Corridor portion of Amtrak's business that runs through Pennsylvania has emerged as one of the corporation's most successful routes. Amtrak operates nearly 120 daily trains through Pennsylvania, and its hub in Philadelphia is the corporation's third busiest station in the country, serving more than 3.5 million riders each year. Other segments of Amtrak's business model, excluding the Northeast Corridor, have caused the corporation to continue to lag fiscally.

Many of Amtrak's fiscal problems stem from underused, subsidized tracks in the Midwest. The Northeast Corridor represents 45.2 percent of Amtrak's ridership and 45.8 percent of its revenues, but costs only 31.3 percent of total expenses. This corridor should not lose out because other regions are not as profitable. Instead, these other regions must also take steps to become more efficient and profitable. Amtrak has begun to

implement reform by reducing its operating costs to help fund needed capital improvements. Core operating expenses are now less than they were in 2000. Over the last 30 months, Amtrak CEO and president David Gunn has cut operating costs, reduced the employee head count from slightly fewer than 25,000 to just under 20,000 employees, has increased the number of trains they operate by 20 percent and implemented internal reforms designed to control costs and improve efficiencies.

In mid-2003, Amtrak began the process of rebuilding its aged infrastructure and equipment, allowing its trains to run faster and more reliably. Not only will operational costs be lowered, but also riders will get better service. To stop Amtrak in its tracks now — in the process of revitalization — would be costly and counterproductive.

I hope that a combination of federal assistance for rebuilding efforts in the near-term and the continuation of Amtrak's capital improvements will result in business growth and independence. We must continue to provide federal assistance to Amtrak as it strives for self-sufficiency, while holding Amtrak accountable for its reform efforts.

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