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At House Hearing, Menendez Tells Amtrak Board He Doesn't Trust Them to Protect Rail Passengers

Washington, D.C. - U.S. Representative Robert Menendez (D-NJ), a member of the Subcommittee on Railroads of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, made the following statement today at a committee hearing on Amtrak

Statement of Congressman Robert Menendez

Subcommittee on Railroads Hearing on Amtrak Governance Issues

November 15, 2005

I'd like to thank Mr. Laney and Mr. Rosen for being here today, although I'm not pleased at all that Mr. Sosa and Mr. Hall have defied the wishes of this committee and refused to appear today. I think it's interesting that they can easily make it back to Washington in order to fire Mr. Gunn, but can't answer a Congressional request to explain themselves. I think that shows exactly how interested some of the President's Board appointees are in the operation of a railroad.

This merely highlights my concerns with the way the Board has been put together, and the way it has been operating. Mr. Laney, Mr. Rosen, I'll be very blunt here: I don't trust you. And I don't think this Congress can trust you. Your actions in the past few months - passing a resolution to try to spin off the Northeast Corridor, keeping that resolution secret for as long as possible, and firing Mr. Gunn - have not given me any confidence in your intentions for Amtrak, or your ability to run it properly.

I'm particularly concerned about what your intentions might be for the Northeast Corridor. I can not overemphasize the importance of the Corridor to the people of New Jersey. It's not just the millions of people who ride Amtrak each year. It's the nearly one hundred thousand commuters each day who rely on the Northeast Corridor to get back and forth to work. New Jersey Transit operates over four hundred trains a day over the Northeast Corridor - nearly four times the number that Amtrak does. New Jersey puts over one hundred million dollars a year into the Northeast Corridor, and has put over one and half billion dollars into it the past ten years - and yet they were not consulted, they were not even informed about your decision to create an infrastructure subsidiary?

This is one of the most densely traveled, heavily congested corridors anywhere in North America. Trains cross from New Jersey to New York every two and a half minutes, and this operation requires a tremendous amount of skill. I can not allow anything to jeopardize the safety of the people on these trains. And yet you seem to want to play with

fire. Despite your reassuring words to me when we last met, Mr. Laney, all of your actions appear to be aimed at one goal: selling off the Northeast Corridor. With a hand-picked board of administration loyalists and major Bush fundraisers, a secret resolution to create a Northeast Corridor subsidiary, a hasty decision to fire the company's president because he disagreed with your plan, your words are not reassuring at all. Congress and the American people have clearly demonstrated they want no part of the administration's privatization schemes.

And yet the board moves forward, intent on enacting these so-called reforms that seek to emulate the British model of separating the infrastructure from the operations - a model that has resulted in worse performance, higher government subsidies, and fatal crashes. My worst fear is that you're trying to sell off the Northeast Corridor to a group of investors who will use it to get huge tax breaks from the depreciation. This is not a toy railroad. This is a highly complex, vital national transportation asset, and unless you treat it as such you are putting both the safety and the economic security of hundreds of thousands of people at serious risk.

Frankly, I think the board has shown an utter lack of respect for Congress, and you have eliminated any confidence we had in your ability to be good stewards of the Northeast Corridor. It has become abundantly clear that this Board's lack of experience in running a railroad is matched only by its lack of commitment to preserving rail service for both the intercity and commuter riders who depend on it. Do changes need to be made in the way Amtrak operates? Perhaps. Do some reforms need to be enacted? Probably. But should these reforms be made by a handpicked board of political appointees with no railroad experience, who don't bother to consult the States, transit agencies, employees, or passengers that depend on the Corridor -- who don't bother to consult with Congress about their actions? Absolutely not.

We have no alternative but to explore actions that will protect our customers and our citizens. We need to restore confidence in the governance of Amtrak and the Northeast Corridor. We need to have a deliberative, consultative and very open, public process that engages the stakeholders directly in deciding the future of rail service. We need to end decision making in darkness. We need to find alternatives that put the Northeast Corridor firmly in accountable public hands - ensuring that the federal government meets its responsibility while balancing the governance between the interests of intercity and commuter services. I will be working with my colleagues to find these alternatives and will fight side by side with them to prevent the board from pulling a fast one and dismantling Amtrak.

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