STB Docket EP-726-0

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Amtrak Utilization

I live in central Arkansas, and regularly travel aboard Amtrak trains from Little Rock, Arkansas. Little Rock is served by Amtrak trains 21-22; I occasionally travel to Texas destinations (Austin or San Antonio), and more frequently use Amtrak to travel to Chicago. I also travel to Washington, D.C., utilizing connections with other Amtrak routes at Chicago.

On Time Performance

Little Rock is served by one northbound train (train 22 – 11:39 p.m.) and one southbound train (train 21 – 3:10 a.m.) Little Rock is similar to many stations served by a single Amtrak train, and helps to illustrate why proposed on time performance standards must be applied to intermediate stations. The southbound time (3:10 a.m.) is difficult under the best of circumstances. Amtrak cannot guarantee estimated train arrival times, and the automated train status system warns that "Amtrak trains can, and often do, make up time." Thus, it is generally necessary to arrive at the station well in advance of the scheduled departure time, only to discover that the train is operating 60 to 90 minutes late, or worse. This makes for a very unpleasant start to a trip and is a deterrent to repeat ridership.

Late trains take a toll in terms of passenger satisfaction, and I have been on very late trains where the prevailing sentiment of fellow passengers was to never ride Amtrak again. There is also an economic cost, in terms of missed connections, additional hotel nights, and disrupted meeting schedules, as well as costs to Amtrak for additional hours paid to crews staffing the trains due to tardy operation.

On Time Performance versus unreasonably padded schedules

Amtrak trains frequently have large amounts of excess time (schedule padding) built into schedules in order to help assure that trains arrive at endpoints or railroad contract points "on time," regardless of the degree of late operation at intermediate stations. I travel frequently on the Texas Eagle and wish to provide two examples from my personal experiences on this route, although this method of loose scheduling is apparent with most long-distance routes.

Example #1: The rail distance between Austin and San Antonio, Texas is 82 miles, with one scheduled intermediate stop. Amtrak train 21 is scheduled to depart Austin at 6:30 p.m. and arrive in San Antonio at 9:55 p.m., 205 minutes; an average trip speed of 24mph. When the train is operating on time, arrival in San Antonio an hour or more in advance of schedule time is common. In cases where the train operated 90 minutes late from Little Rock to San Marcos, it is still possible for the train to arrive at the endpoint of San Antonio within the 30-minute allowance proposed by the STB, and thus be classified as "on-time" although the operation at many intermediate stations was unacceptably late. Amtrak train 22, operating over the same track in the opposite direction, is scheduled for 143 minutes, a variance of 62 minutes compared to train 21.

Example #2: The rail distance between Poplar Bluff and St. Louis, Missouri is 169 miles with no scheduled intermediate station stops. Train 21 is scheduled to depart St. Louis at 8:00 p.m. and arrive in Poplar Bluff at 11:42 p.m., 222 minutes. Train 22 is scheduled to depart Poplar Bluff at 2:44 a.m. and arrive in St. Louis at 7:19 a.m., 275 minutes, thus benefitting from an additional 53 minutes of "padding". When train 22 is on time at Poplar Bluff, it often arrives in St. Louis an hour early. A train operating 90 minutes late at every intermediate station between Dallas and Poplar Bluff could still be classified as "on time" (within 30 minutes of schedule time) at St. Louis.

Summary

The STB review of passenger train on-time performance will certainly benefit the traveling public by highlighting the high cost of chronically late trains. The proposal of 5 minutes allowance per 100 miles, up to 30 minute maximum is a very reasonable proposal, as far as it goes. Due to the scheduling examples cited above, the OTP standards should be applied at intermediate stations to avoid being skewed by schedule padding which has been added as trains near major terminals. Amtrak's existing reporting system already provides on-time performance for each intermediate station, and STB's failure to include OTP reporting for these intermediate stations would greatly diminish the value and the accuracy of the STB overview of actual passenger train operations.