

# Insiders say:

# 'This is BIG'

## Yakima Valley-Seattle Passenger Rail study financed

by Jim Fossett

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OLYMPIA – On Tuesday, May 21, Governor **Jay Inslee** signed a bill that would underwrite a \$250,000 study on a passenger rail service between the westside and Yakima Valley, i.e., right through Hyak, Easton, Cle Elum, Thorp and Ellensburg. The *NKC Tribune* caught up with All Aboard Washington (AAWA) Government Affairs Director **Luis Moscoso** to learn more.

*How long has All Aboard Washington been working to make this first step happen?*

"They seriously started this effort four years ago. Contact with Central Washington University, the institution that did our study in 2017, had been contacted in 2016 about how we could work with them. I understand AAWA was behind an earlier study on the same matter over 10 years ago that prompted WSDOT to get involved."

*Why are you calling this*

*study a measurable, even major step forward? It's only a \$250,000 investment.*

"There have been Washington State Department of Transportation Rail Plans that previously studied and made recommendations about restoring passenger rail service in the Yakima Valley, but the expense of improving the corridor and collaborating with BNSF, owner and manager of the corridor, made that untenable in the past. I believe it's also because there was no apparent demand for intra-state service.

"When the Empire Builder ran on this corridor until 1980 it was seen as a long-distance train, but in the four years since AAWA started working on what we called our *Yakima Valley Initiative* we have heard a lot from local businesses, travel agencies, wineries and public officials who believe restoration of passenger service would be a real boon for the local economy and a needed alternative to cars.

"We all believe there would be significant use by Eastern Washington residents going to Seattle/Tacoma for travel, sports and entertainment."

### Study completion deadline

*The study must be completed by 2020, but you can't ask for more dollars until 2021, correct? In that case, what funding will you be requesting for the next phase, which*

*would entail what?*

"We could ask for more funding in the state's 2020 transportation budget, but we would have to show enough interest now in justifying an acceleration of the research.

"AAWA believes local movers and shakers who are interested in this must take the lead in requesting the Legislature to invest in expanding cross-state passenger rail.

"The Legislature's Connecting Washington philosophy should invest more in Eastern Washington rail infrastructure as well as in the I-5 Corridor on the west side.

"Discussions with BNSF and Amtrak should be started as soon as possible to understand how they should collaborate on this with the state."

### Project start – when?

*If everything stays on course, how many years would it take to get rail?*

"We'll have to wait for the report to tell us that. Infrastructure investments are likely to be more considerable with the costs of upgrading stations, grade separations and crossings, but building this now will lessen the need to only rely on state highways and the continually increasing cost of expanding and maintaining them."

### Who's involved?

*Are these the parties involved in this study: The Joint*

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*...Transportation Committee (both houses, both parties), AMTRAK, BNSF, WSDOT, All Aboard Washington and the Yakima Tribe?*

"I haven't read the Request for Proposal yet, but I would assume they all would be. WSDOT Rail division told me last week they were waiting to see what they would be asked to provide."

## What's the \$250K cover?

*What will you use the \$250,000 for? Commuter surveys? Preliminary engineering designs?*

"As I mentioned, the Joint Transportation Committee staff will release an RFP. That should spell it out."

## Study ramp up - when?

*How long will it take to ramp-up the study?*

"The Joint Transportation Committee, composed of Legislators, meets during the interim. It already has a calendar of activities scheduled for this summer and fall. You can view it with a visit to <https://tinyurl.com/y3mqhngu>.

"I assume they will announce the research proposal and the contractor will do the work. AAWA has already offered to help promote and underwrite focus groups and public meetings in the corridor. The Joint Transportation Committee doesn't meet during the session so I presume the contractor will give an update on their work at the final meeting on Dec. 17. And then they'll start writing up a draft report that could be done by the end of the short session in March. That leaves about three months to finish the report by June 2020."

## What else is needed?

*Ultimately this project needs momentum, something to push it forward. What would that be?*

"I really hope the media can generate the kind of publicity the whole valley can pay attention to. Each community may come to understand how it could help them. But this has to be done simultaneously by and for all. This should be a regional effort, much like how the Seattle/Tacoma metro area addresses their regional issues. I hope public planning organizations will take this on."

## About AAWA

All Aboard Washington, previously known as the Washington Association of Rail Passengers, is a 501(c)3 nonprofit headquartered at 2913 West Marine View Drive in Everett. History: for over 40 years its mission statement has been: promote better passenger and freight rail service in the Pacific Northwest.