



Washington Rail News

August/September 1992

Publication of the Washington Association of Railroad Passengers
A Not-for-profit Consumer Organization
"...getting the Pacific Northwest on the right track."

Amtrak flunks Passenger Service 101 in Whitefish station closing fiasco

In June a strange smell was noticed in the Whitefish, MT Amtrak station. A Montana Dept. of Health and Environmental Sciences investigation determined that a clogged sewer line in the crawl space had backed up. The department also took air samples that turned up fairly high concentrations of mold spores, particularly in the crawl space and baggage room.

The health department notified the Stumptown Historical Society, owner of the station, and Amtrak. Peach Smith, district supervisor of stations, first put the station on restricted hours of operation, opening it only an hour before train arrival until just after departure. This was inconvenient but workable.

Then Amtrak ordered the complete shutdown of the station on June 21. However, the station did remain in operation until the machinists strike against CSX Corp. on June 24 caused a nearly nationwide employee lockout by the railroads. The station was not reopened and absolutely no passenger services were available.

The health department provided the historical society with suggestions on how to clean the building and reduce the chances of a reoccurrence of the problem. At no time did the health department order or even suggest to Amtrak that the station be closed. William Hooper, Industrial Hygienist for the health department, told Amtrak, "The sampling and

analytical methods for mold spores used in this report are experimental. In fact...there are no known standard methods. In addition, there are no known standards for mold spore concentrations in the air."

However, Amtrak's medical director in Washington, DC decided that a sensitized person who could develop cold-like symptoms from the mold spores might sue. This led to the continuing station closure after Congress intervened in the strike/lockout.

No one but Amtrak felt the station needed to be completely closed. But suppose Amtrak did make the correct decision in closing the station. Then does it not have an obligation to its passengers to try and maintain some semblance of station services? Is not its main purpose for existence to provide service to the passenger? Instead, Amtrak elected to totally abandon its passengers boarding and detraining in Whitefish.

Not only were ticketing, checked baggage and express not available, but there were no restrooms, no telephone (it's inside the building), and no shelter from a week of rain at the end of June.

Fortunately, the Whitefish community stepped into this vast void. Volunteers manned the stop at train time to assist passengers and provide information. A local motor coach operator parked a bus at the (See **Whitefish**, page 4)

Olympia-Lacey station dedication changed to August 15

The open house and building dedication for the Olympia-Lacey station has been moved to August 15. The open house will be from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Tours will be given for those interested. The dedication ceremony will be at 1:00 p.m.

The station should be substantially complete by the 15th, including the brick plaza. This will be the only station in the Northwest to have arrival and departure TV monitors among its many amenities. The station was designed after consulting with Amtrak station agents to determine the best layout and arrangement for a station.

Invited guests include local, state and federal politicians; Amtrak officials; and BN officials.

An extra coach will be operated from Seattle on the *Pioneer*. It will return on whichever afternoon train departs Portland first. We invite all WashARP members to the grand opening.

Ridership this past spring is up 15 percent over last year, which was up 25 to 30 percent over 1990. We are continuing to work with Amtrak on staffing the station. It appears we will soon have a full service station.

(See WashARP News for changes to the August WashARP meeting.)

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Spokane intermodal station rehabilitation funded! See p. 3.

**From the
Executive
Director's
Desk by
Lloyd H. Flem**

**Wash-
ARP
and
Politics**

WashARP does not, as an organization, endorse specific candidates for elected office. We acknowledge, though our membership all support the improvement of rail passenger services, we may differ considerably on other public issues. In addition, WashARP's corporate status as a not-for-profit organization inhibits such specific political participation.

But are we "political"? Of course! Among my most important functions is working the political process in Olympia to bring about legislation and policy implementation to benefit passenger rail services. And we feel it totally appropriate to inform the WashARP membership who passenger rail's friends in Olympia (and DeeCee) appear to be, and to urge WashARP members, as individuals, to support these friends' candidacies.

My rule is to seek and find friends among both Republicans and Democrats and to avoid formal long-term alliances with broad-issue political groups who are closely identified with specific ideologies or parties. WashARP has, on given issues, made camp with conservative, agrarian Eastern Washingtonians and with liberal Seattle environmentalists. We were consistent in that our positions favored the preservation, improvement, and expansion of rail as a means of efficiently moving goods and people.

So who are some elected official "friends," as seen from here? Our entire U.S. House delegation has been good recently. Unfortunately for us, Amtrak's strongest supporter on the GOP side, first district's John Miller, has chosen not to run for reelection. Seventh district's Jim McDermott and third's Jolene Unsoeld (both D) are running and have signed on as co-sponsors of HR 4414, the Ampenny bill, which, if passed, would assure adequate capital funding for Amtrak indefinitely. Second district Congressman Al Swift (D-Bellingham) is the author of Ampenny. Swift serves a key Amtrak chairmanship in the House and is among the strongest, most

effective supporters of intercity rail in Congress. Individual WashARP members have already "doorbelled" for Swift and plan future assistance to his campaign.

In running for governor, Sid Morrison (R-Yakima, currently fourth district congressman) and Washington State House Speaker Joe King (D-Vancouver) have issued pro-rail, pro-Amtrak position statements. We await word from others in the gubernatorial race and specifics from those seeking retiring U.S. Senator Brock Adams' seat.

Uncertainty defines the shape of next year's state legislature, with many retiring, including Senate Transportation Committee Chair Pat Patterson (R-Pullman), whose support for the first-ever state Amtrak enhancement dollars was essential in this last session. Several current senators with pro-rail records want the chairmanship. Which party will control the Senate is unpredictable at this time. WashARP will work with whomever it becomes to help assure continuation of the state's role in passenger rail.

The House, with its large Democratic majority, will likely remain with the D's, meaning the strong friend of balanced transportation, Tacoma's Ruth Fisher, will lead the House Transportation Committee. WashARP understands Fisher should win reelection without undo problems.

WashARP members, including some who have and will work for Democrat Al Swift, also will hit the pavement for Republican state House member Jeannette Wood (Woodway), passenger rail's best advocate in the minority caucus.

There are other "good folks" running for office, including some challengers to existing "good guy" incumbents. Future columns will mention a few, and will, if deemed necessary, name any candidates that seem overtly hostile to balanced transportation and rail.

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Your Olympia office will be deeply involved in several important rail projects in the weeks to come. I'll be speaking for WashARP at the dedication of the fine new Olympia-Lacey Centennial station Aug. 15. (WashARP board member Rich DeGarmo is chairing the dedication. See story on page 1.) Aug. 17-19 I'll be in Whitefish,

MT having been invited to speak to the National Conference of State Rail Officials as a representative of rail passenger advocacy organizations. WashARP will again be involved in WSDOT's State Transportation Conference in SeaTac Sept. 9-11, chairing the Friday, Sept. 11 workshop session on the Statewide Rail Passenger Program.

Yet another special project is WashARP's organizing and chairing the High Speed Ground Transportation (we're talking trains, folks!) session for an October 10 Business Seminar Program, part of the Central Puget Sound Economic Development District's Japan Week activities, to be held in Bellevue. WashARP's board unanimously endorsed our participation. The program will hopefully further educate the business and public sector establishments in King, Kitsap, Pierce and Snohomish counties about the immense and affirmative role conventional and higher-tech trains now play in Japan and could play on the U.S. west coast.

WashARP board members involved in the program planning include President Chuck Mott, Hal Cooper, Loren Herrigstad, and your Executive Director. Puget Sound rail advocates are encouraged to attend Japan week. (CPSEDD, New England Bldg., 219 1st Ave. S., Suite 305, Seattle, 98104 for info.) All WashARPer's may attend the State Transportation Conference. (WSDOT, Public Transportation Office, PO Box 47373, Olympia, 98504, Attn: Rosalin Wilmes.) Neither conference is free. The state conference has a \$100 registration.

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Need we remind you that Sea-Tac Airport and I-5 are increasingly crowded. Avoid those unpleasantries when you can and ride the trains. Let's maintain our state's good Amtrak ridership during this economic recession when other areas' air and rail patronage is down!

Spokane intermodal station gets green light

The Federal Transit Administration has agreed to fund half of the \$8.4 mill. cost of transforming the Spokane Amtrak station into a regional transportation center, according to a July 16 article in the *Spokesman Review*.

Last year the project did not rank high enough on the FTA's list and was not funded. Congressional interest in intermodal facilities (remember the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation and Efficiency Act) and the project location (Speaker Tom Foley's hometown) helped get the project funded this year.

The state is providing \$2.7 mill. and the remaining \$1.5 mill. is coming from local government and business.

The transportation center will house Amtrak, Greyhound, other regional bus lines, the Spokane Transit Authority, airport shuttles, food shops, and other stores. BN has turned over the building to the city but will remain as a tenant. Construction is expected to start late this year.

WSDOT's Tom Hanson reports serious interest in station rehabilitation from the cities of Centralia and Wenatchee. Bellingham is planning an entirely new station adjacent to the Alaska ferry terminal. Kelso officials are interested in improved parking at the Amtrak station.

Seattle has a consultant study underway to determine how to turn King Street station into an intermodal terminal. One idea being discussed involves use of both King Street station and adjacent Union Station. Interim cosmetic improvements are being looked at. Renovation is needed so the station that should be the state's showcase will not remain one of the most dreary stations we have.

Amtrak Notes

The U.S. House has passed Amtrak's 1993 budget. It is tight, containing barely enough for operations, only \$74 mill. for capital (Amtrak requested \$300 mill.) and zero for the Northeast Corridor Improvement Project. It is up to the Senate to improve on these numbers in a very difficult budget year. Write our senators urging them to approve Amtrak's full capital request.... **WashARP member Craig Thorpe** called the Washington AAA to complain about their narrow-minded opposition to Congressman Al Swift's (D-Bellingham) gas-tax-penny-for-Amtrak-capital legislation. He was told they had received nearly 20 responses in opposition to their viewpoint. They normally get an average of three or four complaints about their stand on a particular issue. The public relations person Craig talked with said that the AAA leadership has set up and taken notice with so many of their members telling them to rethink their position.... **Amtrak and American Mobile Satellite Corp.** are testing a satellite-based communications system, called RailComm, on the *Empire Builder*. The six-month test began in May. RailComm allows the chief of On Board Services to communicate via a keyboard with Amtrak's operations center in Philadelphia. The system is a breakthrough for trains operating in sparsely populated areas where cellular phone service is not available. It can, for example, be used to report the train's location, thus providing more accurate arrival information at intermediate points, and to report sleeper no-shows so the rooms can be resold.... ***An Evaluation of Service to Areas not Presently Served*** was issued by Amtrak on July 6. It contains several routes in Washington. Details next time.

Rail Miscellany

Metro continues to slowly work toward a Nov. 1993 vote on a regional mass transit system. The draft EIS is due out in September and the final EIS in February 1993.... **The 1993 federal share** of the funding for the Tacoma-Seattle commuter train has been approved by the House Appropriations Committee.... **Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton** has spoken in favor of high speed rail as part of a package to rebuild the United States' infrastructure.... **The Los Angeles-Long Beach Blue Line** survived the riots after the Rodney King verdict with only a few scratches. Even the rioters know the value of the light rail line to their community. Also, McDonalds restaurants survived virtually untouched while many Arco stations were gutted. McDonalds has a large nationwide community involvement program. Arco has none.

New Jersey: no new highways

New Jersey has cancelled \$1.2 billion in new highway projects, according to the April 8 *Wall Street Journal*. "The old ways don't work any more," said Thomas Downs, New Jersey transportation commissioner. Government officials are making an all-out effort to get commuters out of their cars and onto mass transit. The state will spend \$580 mill. on transit in the fiscal year that began on July 1. Officials plan to tie the entire state together with rail lines.

Although there are many critics, state officials hope the new policy will promote more intensive development near train stations. Blue Cross/Blue Shield moved from the suburbs to downtown Newark because of an employee turnover rate of 25 percent a year, partly caused by clerical workers who found it difficult to reach the suburbs.

In Portland, OR, for example, more than \$800 mill. of office, retail and residential development has occurred near train stations since MAX opened in 1986.

WashARP News

The **August 15 Meeting** (previously scheduled for August 8) will be immediately after the Olympia-Lacey station dedication ceremony at Meggin's on the Capitol City Golf Course, 5500 Yelm Hwy. A barbecue lunch will be served and Amtrak officials will give an informal talk and answer questions. Pay at the door. Transportation to and from the station will be provided.

The **September 12** meeting will be at **Andy's Diner** in Seattle at 12:15 p.m.

Whitefish, from page 1 station so passengers could wait out of the rain and have use of a rest room. A local hardware store provided a cellular phone for passengers that needed to make calls. Portable toilets were brought in and the National Guard provided a large tent.

NARP at-large director Barry Green of Glendive, MT volunteered to be the point man on getting passenger services restored. He communicated with

local Whitefish officials, state DOT officials, NARP, and Montana's western district congressman and two senators.

When more air samples were taken in early July the mold spore counts were even higher, partly because the building had been closed up and partly because the historical society had not followed the state's disinfection instruction closely enough. It was becoming obvious the building would not be reopening soon. (Interestingly, BN has continued to maintain its second floor offices throughout this incident, apparently without trouble.)

Amtrak, realizing the problem was not going to be resolved soon and being buffeted with protests by local officials, the media and rail passenger advocates, finally moved to provide alternate passenger facilities on July 8. Stinging letters from Congressman Pat Williams (D) and Senator Conrad Burns (R) demanding explanations also helped push Amtrak into action.

Two trailers were brought in from Boise and set up. Partial station services were finally restored on July 17, more than

three weeks after the closure. There are still only portable toilets, limited waiting room space and no public phone because no phone booths are available. The historical society was planning to remodel the main floor this fall to provide museum space and up-graded Amtrak facilities. They have moved up their schedule and plan to start construction work by August 15, with reopening of the building about three months later.

Amtrak already had a black eye in northwest Montana for dumping kitchen garbage along the tracks as the *Empire Builder* skirts Glacier Park. The garbage attracts bears and they are often hit by passing trains. The station situation certainly made their public opinion polls plummet even more. Amtrak should have taken immediate steps at the end of the strike/lockout to provide temporary passenger facilities. To not do so was dereliction of its responsibility to its passengers.

The company owes the entire Flathead Valley a sincere apology and needs to do something to make amends. Perhaps a community potluck would be in order.

Washington Association of
Railroad Passengers
P.O. Box 70381
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