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East-West Cascades Passenger Service Considerations beyond the STEER Study

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Background

The July 2020 STEER study states that “further work will be required to confirm or refine...findings, including service definition, track and station design along with possible ridership and financial outcomes.”

The focus of the STEER study was to determine operational & technical feasibility, estimate infrastructure & equipment costs, and estimate ridership & revenue. A detailed analysis of the costs and benefits was beyond the scope of the study.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to identify (in broad terms) significant factors that were not considered in the STEER study, yet should be considered in evaluating the overall costs and benefits of the East-West service.

Discussion

In passenger rail feasibility studies, the demand analysis begets the operations plan, which begets the overall costs and benefits. The demand analysis is the basis for the entire effort. In this case, the STEER study suffered from a severe shortcoming: it assumed that the only ridership an East-West passenger rail service would garner would be from a small percentage of diverted car drivers.

The assumption that all passengers would otherwise drive is problematic for multiple reasons.

According to [Amtrak's own data](#), only 47% of rail passengers in Washington State are derived from cars; this means that STEER's ridership analysis presumed that riders on the new service would behave very differently from people riding trains today. It implies that STEER underestimated ridership by as much as 50%.

The route of the proposed East-West service goes through the Tri-Cities, one of Washington State's fastest-growing population centers, as well as many less-advantaged counties where [access to vehicle ownership is low](#). The STEER study, through its presumption of car ownership, entirely dismissed these disadvantaged populations, and the need for transportation equity.

Ridership must be holistically readdressed, and then benefits for the service must be tabulated. A feasibility study anticipating only the costs of service creates a false impression that trains only cost money and harbor no benefits.

Recommendation

Validate the above assumption by evaluating the following factors (and perhaps others) to determine whether the proposed East-West service generates significant value to warrant the investment.

The Value to Society

- Reduced road maintenance from reduced highway vehicle miles traveled (VMT)
- Reduced vehicle accidents & deaths from reduced VMT
- Carbon dioxide emission reduction over other means of transportation
- Airfare saved from diverted air trips
- Determine the value of "Connecting Washington", i.e. the value of service to rural and underserved communities

Economic Impacts

- Visitor/retail spending
- Business activity/opportunities
- Tax revenues
- Employment/wages
- Property values

Other Cost & Benefit Considerations

- Station Infrastructure: Existing Ellensburg & Toppenish stations may be available for use based on informal conversations with local owners
Property adjacent to BNSF tracks at Yakima (Union Gap) may be available for a new multi-modal facility
- Station Stops: Evaluate the cost/benefit of station stops at Prosser, Connell, Cheney/Spokane Int'l airport, and effect on ridership
- How increased frequencies could improve ridership exponentially
- What Federal, local, or private funding might be available

Conclusion

It is easy to look at direct costs while overlooking the value of benefits to the public. The factors mentioned in this paper should be included in a detailed analysis so that informed decisions can be made regarding whether to invest in the proposed East-West service.