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Key Points from AN ASSESSMENT OF REINSTATING PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE ON THE STAMPEDE PASS CORRIDOR

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Full study available at

https://www.aawa.us/site/assets/files/1114/stampede_pass_rail_study.pdf

The research presented in this report has documented a set of circumstances favorable to the restoration of scheduled passenger rail services in the Stampede Pass corridor after a hiatus approaching forty years. These factors include:

1. Historically, rail travel along the Stampede Pass corridor was vital to the economic development and everyday life of communities in central Washington and could be again.
2. Restored rail services would provide an important alternative to I-90 to overcome the formidable obstacle presented by the Cascade Mountains.
3. Seasonally heavy snowfall frequently interrupts vehicle traffic over I-90 further augmenting the appeal of another way.
4. Traffic on the segments of I-90 and I-82 paralleling the Stampede Pass corridor has grown about three fold since scheduled passenger rail service ended in 1981, and parts of the highway network are now prone to significant congestion.
5. Population in the five counties along the corridor (King, Kittitas, Yakima, Benton, and Franklin) has grown faster than the overall US population and their economies have likewise outpaced the nation.
6. In the decades since services were terminated, significant new sources of traffic generation have emerged east of the Cascades including Suncadia, a much enlarged Central Washington University, and winery-based tourism in the Yakima Valley.
7. A significant number of people commute long-distance along the corridor. The rapid growth of already very high housing prices in Seattle and its suburbs is likely to foster further trans-Cascades commuting, a portion of which might be accommodated by a rail service.
8. A survey conducted in communities along the line found strong support for restored services. Support was strongest in Yakima, which not coincidentally is the largest metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest without scheduled passenger rail services.
9. For respondents from east of the Cascades, the predicted number of train trips per year to the Seattle area and beyond (e.g., connecting to the Amtrak Cascades between Eugene and Vancouver, BC) averaged 18. For respondents from west of the Tri-Cities, the predicted number of train trips per year to the



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Tri-Cities and beyond (e.g., the Amtrak Empire Builder between Portland and Chicago) averaged 10.

10. The survey found that projected use of rail services was consistent across income groups but substantially higher among younger respondents than older ones. The latter finding augurs well for the future inasmuch as it is likely to take quite a few years until the trains roll again.

Yet while the results of this research hold some promise for the restoration of services, there are a number of cautionary points that should be emphasized. First, population density east of the Cascade Mountains is generally light and funds that would need to be expended to restore and operate a passenger train on the Stampede Pass corridor would have opportunity costs inasmuch as those same funds could be invested in other areas of the state with greater transportation demand. Second and related to the last point, the area served by this corridor is physically large so that the ease with which a train could be used may have been overestimated by our survey respondents; a given individual is unlikely to live and/or work close to a station on the line. Third, if and when service over the corridor resumes, its frequency will likely be low, undermining its utility for some roles (e.g., commuting). Fourth, the present study does not include any assessment of the cost of restoring services; and the survey results, while interesting, lack the rigor of a representative sample that would make them a more meaningful basis for predicting demand.

The survey featured in this report gave approximately 2,500 people in the Stampede Pass corridor and beyond an opportunity to share their views about bringing back passenger trains to this region. With few exceptions, they support the idea; but the survey was just the beginning. To move this idea farther down the tracks towards reality, more research is required. In Fall 2017, Brett Lucas, the senior planner of the city of Cheney and an adjunct faculty member at Eastern Washington University, began work on gravity modeling and geographic information system (GIS)-based analysis of the corridor. The result of these analyses will be more precise estimates of how many people would travel on a restored rail service and over what sectors. Beyond the work of academics and students, it is vital the Washington State Department of Transportation undertake an in-depth analysis of the Stampede Pass corridor including estimation of potential demand, identification of station locations, projection of infrastructure and operating costs, evaluation of possible operators, and consideration of various funding scenarios.