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NEW ENGLAND
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This piece appeared in:



U.S. House needs to follow Senate support for Amtrak

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May 5, 2008

A light can finally be seen at the end of the tunnel as New England emerges from the deep freeze of another tough winter. The last few months have seen record snowfalls in many towns and that nasty weather, combined with increased traffic from long weekends in January and February, spring breaks and an always busy Easter weekend, can transform normally routine highway traffic into parking lots and airport terminals into reluctant overnight accommodations.

Last year the U.S. Senate took a step toward alleviating these problems by showing strong support for a long-range commitment to Amtrak passenger rail. For years The New England Council, the country's oldest regional business organization, has been an important voice in Washington in supporting Amtrak. It is difficult to overstate the importance of safe, efficient and comprehensive passenger rail to individuals, families and businesses in Rhode Island, and throughout the East Coast and the nation. It is critical that in 2008 the House of Representatives seize the momentum created by the recent Senate passage of a six-year Amtrak reauthorization bill.

Travelers of all kinds face frustrating challenges these days. The high cost of gas makes driving a costly proposition in even the most fuel-efficient vehicles and traffic jams, accidents and construction can turn a seemingly predictable drive into a day-long headache. Airports up and down the East Coast are operating at near capacity and minor mechanical glitches, bad weather and overbooking (especially early in the day) can cause ripples in the aviation system that lead to seemingly endless waits in terminals and on tarmacs.

Amtrak operates more than 30 trains every day in Rhode Island and in Fiscal Year 2007 saw more than 750,000 boardings or dismounting of passengers from Amtrak trains. The rail service also benefited Rhode Island residents in other ways, employing more than 250 Rhode Islanders with total wages of more than \$15.7 million during FY07. Amtrak continues to be a critical piece of the state's overall transportation network as a reliable and affordable option for workers heading to out-of-state commercial centers like Boston without clogging the Interstate 95 and Interstate 93 corridors.

This success extends beyond New England as well. Last year, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, D.C., were in the top eight of the busiest stations in the country in total ridership, and more than 1,700 trains daily operated over some portion of the Northeast. This accounted for nearly 9.5 million passengers last year. Without Amtrak, these travelers would have found an alternative way to arrive at their destination, further choking already congested highways and runways, or even worse, forgoing the trip and negatively affecting our regional and national economy.

Long-term planning for Amtrak has not been addressed by Congress since the rail system's current reauthorization expired in 2002, giving it no reasonable sense of security on a year-to-year basis. While the Council recognizes the appropriations process funds Amtrak on an annual basis, the Senate bill gives Amtrak the blueprints to begin improving its efficiency, service and economic viability. It is nearly impossible for a business of any size to plan its future not having a reasonable sense of its overall financial position and the Senate's action puts Amtrak one step closer to operating on a sound footing where it can undertake any multi-year changes it deems appropriate.

As you plan your vacations, and undoubtedly build in extra time to accommodate longer lines and increased traffic, think about the millions of Americans that rely on Amtrak service each year. And perhaps more importantly, imagine if that service were unavailable, and those travelers were then forced to the highways or runways. The Senate's action will help Amtrak undertake needed long-term improvements and The New England Council will continue to work to keep Amtrak rolling in the future. •

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