

# MIDWEST RAIL REPORT

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## Long-Distance Trains: A Solid Foundation

*“People don’t understand long distance trains. They think only in terms of Chicago to Seattle or Chicago to Oakland. Those trains serve many different markets as they cross the country.”* – Paul Reistrup, Vice President Passenger Integration, CSX Transportation

*“People forget that trains make stops; some people get on and other people get off.”* – Derrick James, Amtrak customer

Long-distance trains are commonly thought to be a holdover from the past – a little-used, politically driven conveyance whose sole purpose is to maintain political support for the Northeast Corridor. Many



refer to them as “cruise trains.” It is also a widely held belief that long-distance trains are the reason for Amtrak’s financial woes.

These perceptions are driving the political debate and may result in some long-distance routes being discontinued. Since the future of the Midwest system is linked to the

future of long-distance trains, it is important to further understand what long-distance trains really are and what they can do.

First, a word about cruise trains. Cruise trains, such as the American Orient Express or Rocky Mountaineer, do not provide everyday transportation – they provide a service to a very select market: those who are willing to pay a premium for a luxurious train ride. Frequently the patrons fly or drive many miles just to take the train.

Just as automotive advertisers suggest that you will always drive on a scenic highway with no traffic, Amtrak’s ads describe the wonderful accommodations and the fantastic scenery that you will experience when riding the train. This contributes to the perception that Amtrak’s trains are similar to cruise trains, when in fact they are not.

### BASIC TRANSPORTATION

Most riders travel coach. While more comfortable than flying or driving, coach is far from luxurious. Even the first class accommodations are spartan. The food and service levels are typically good, but would not stand up to the scrutiny of a person looking for a cruise experience.

Unlike cruise trains, a single long-distance train fills many roles as it crosses the country. First and foremost it provides a comfortable, convenient, affordable and safe way to travel for an average of 364 people per train start.

In many cases it gets closer to the final destination than flying, particularly in smaller towns where the airport can be several hours away.

Often it is faster than driving, particularly on long trips. Rail’s



market share remains the same, regardless of trip length.

Long-distance trains also have auto competitive times for many trips less than 500 miles (fitting the FRA’s definition of high-speed rail.) For example, Chicago to La Plata, MO is 5 hours 10 minutes by train vs. 7 hours 30 minutes by car.

Trip lengths fill the spectrum from very short hops all the way up to coast-to-coast journeys. The Southwest Chief – which travels 2,250 miles between Chicago and Los Angeles – makes 32 stops, creating 528 possible trips. The average passenger trip length on this route is roughly 1,100 miles. The other long-distance routes also have average trips that are roughly half the route length.

Riders range from the most cost conscious traveler up to the very well



or suffer from horribly inadequate infrastructure. The losses from Amtrak's freight program have placed a burden on the long-distance trains. Inadequate infrastructure has made it difficult to design competitive services.

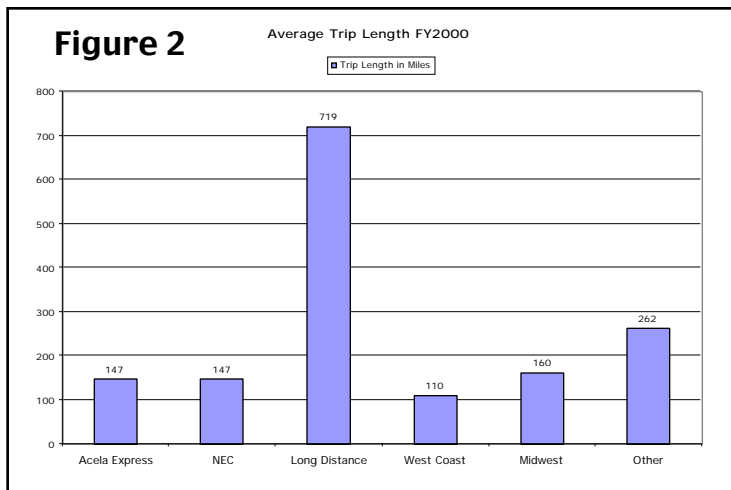
Second, this chart does not indicate how far each passenger is travelling. Figure 2 (right) shows that on corridor trains the average trip is roughly 150 miles. On long-distance trains the trips are much longer – 719 miles on average.

Third, loss per passenger does not accurately represent the high capital requirements of corridor trains.

the fares are too high to divert significant volume from automobile travel.

Figure 4 illustrates volume and productivity. Since long distance trains gather many different kinds of trips into one vehicle they are the most productive trains in the system.

The light bars show total passenger miles by category.



distance trains compare well.

Also, due to their high level of productivity, long distance trains have the lowest operating cost per passenger mile.

Long-distance trains provide a valuable service at a reasonable level of operating support and provide a strong foundation for expanding corridor services in the Midwest.

The NEC and West Coast Corridors have more.

The dark bars represent the average numbers of passengers per mile.

In this category, long-distance trains are the best performing routes.

Figures 1 & 2 are derived from data contained in the Amtrak Reform Council's final report. The route labels have been replaced with letters corresponding to the train categories in figures 3, 4 & 5.

Figures 3, 4 & 5 have been derived from data which was made public by Senator McCain.

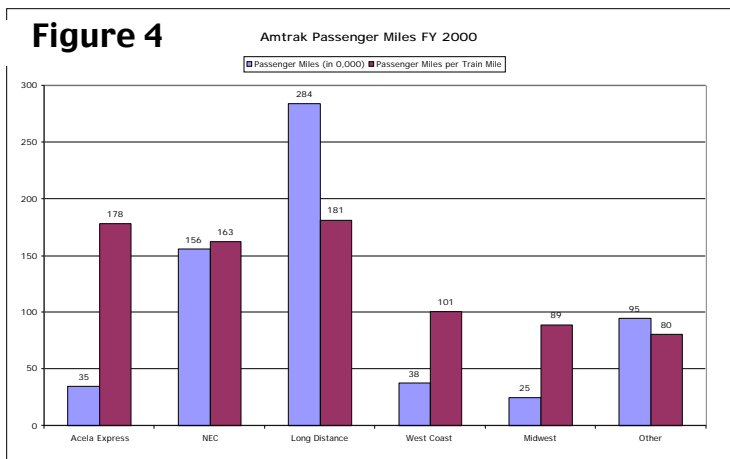
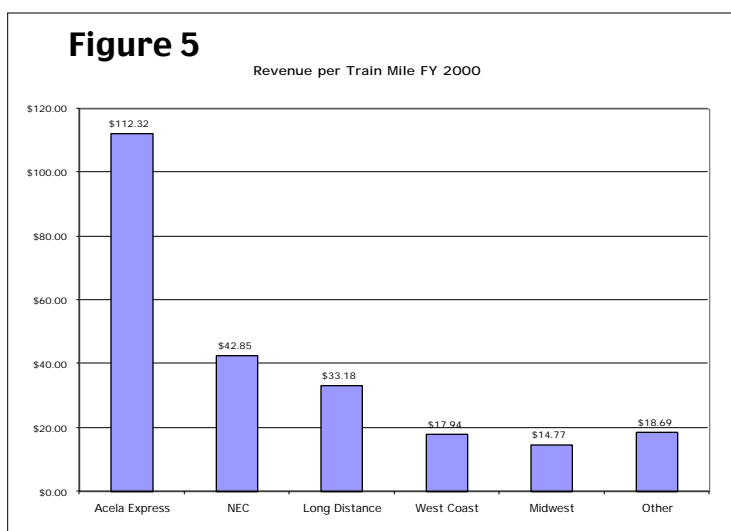


Figure 3 (page 2) provides a more meaningful comparison. By organizing trains by farebox recovery ratio, the picture changes dramatically. In this case most of the long-distance trains are grouped on the left with the Northeast Corridor trains. Most of the other corridor trains are on the right.

On the far left is Acela Express/Metroliner, the only service with a farebox recovery ratio above 100% in FY2001. However, these trains share infrastructure, riders and overhead expenses with other trains in the corridor. Acela Express would not be profitable on its own. Also,

The long-distance trains are providing more transportation than the other categories, both in aggregate and per train.

Figure 5 illustrates the revenue per train mile. Again, the long





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## A strong case for train service in your town.

Dear Rail Supporter,

As you are aware, Amtrak service to your community is at risk of being discontinued.

This newsletter contains information that will help you make a stronger case for protecting and expanding that service.

The Midwest High Speed Rail Coalition is a membership based non-profit promoting better, faster, more frequent passenger train service for nine states of the Midwest.

We are aware that the rail net-

work is very interconnected. Any reductions of services will be a tremendous setback for rail development nationwide.

We have analyzed data made available by the Amtrak Reform Council and Senator McCain's office. We have concluded that, in addition to providing essential transportation services to large parts of the country, long distance trains are very productive, providing a high level of service for a relatively low cost.

Please take some time to read the

enclosed article. Hopefully, you will find it useful.

Feel free to call me at 773-334-6758 if you should have any questions.

Sincerely,

Richard Harnish  
Executive Director

P.S. If you find this information useful, please consider joining our group in order to help defray mailing costs.

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