STEEL WHEELS

PASSENGER RAIL IN CALIFORNIA AND THE WEST

Magazine of the Western Passenger Train Coalition

Spring 2026

In this issue...

CA's exceptionally wet winter is, by early March, beginning to yield colorful dividends as Amtrak *Pacific Surfliner* 768 passes through the United States Marine Corps' Camp Pendleton as it makes it way from Goleta to San Diego. Amtrak California F59PHI 451 is leading this train on this early Spring day.

President's Commentary

Steve Roberts

Welcome to the Spring 2026 edition of Steel Wheels 'E' Magazine. I hope you have been able to explore the new features on the RailPAC website and use the tools for information and advocacy. There is also a PDF version of Steel Wheels you can print to read on the train. Also, under Resources Section, keep an eye on the Rail Projects Map feature. Brian Yanity, RailPAC's VP-South, and RailPAC Director Robert Frampton are working to create an interactive and comprehensive database of rail projects and their status.

In this issue there is an update on the Union Pacific-Norfolk Southern Railroad merger, the second installment of an overview of Orange County stations and their importance to the communities, RailPAC member Ed D'Amato presents the first part of a multipart article on a strategy to create a robust rail system, there is the outlook for California High Speed Rail in 2026, Brian Yanity gives us a look at the Honolulu's new Skyline Rapid Transit, we get a look at the fundamentals needed to build Electrolink in Southern California and finally there is an article by Doug Kerr of bus and rail schedule coordination and redeployment of resources north of the Golden Gate. This should increase convenience for riders.

One of the things I noted in the last issue was that things appeared to be stable at Amtrak. Record ridership and ticket revenues continued into the Fall and in January Congress passed the FY 26 Federal Budget which appropriated sufficient funding for intercity rail operations and capital investment. Then in mid- February the whirlwind began. First, there was a proposed restructuring of Amtrak (we have seen this movie before) and the suspension of the new bi-level initiative.

Under the restructuring proposal the legacy Amtrak Corporation would be a holding company with three subsidiaries – an Infrastructure Management Entity (IME), a Rolling Stock Management Entity (RSME), and an Operating Entity (OE). This restructuring was announced by the FRA but no specific details on the proposal were outlined. The Rail Passengers Association has an excellent overview and discussion of the proposed concept based on what is currently known at –

- Rail Passengers Statement on Proposed Amtrak Restructuring (Rail Passengers Association)
- Passengers React to Restructuring Proposal (Rail Passengers Association)

From my perspective there are two visions of this proposal. The first is that given Amtrak's portfolio of large construction projects, train maintenance facility construction and ongoing NEC infrastructure maintenance, having a specialized organization focused on project delivery and the contractor and supply chain, can strengthen the relationship and bring efficiency and project time savings. In fact, prior to this proposal, Amtrak recently created a separate capital delivery unit to focus on the NEC megaprojects. To give readers a sense of the scale of the mega-projects in the NEC, Amtrak spends more funds per month on capital projects than California High-Speed Rail does.

On the equipment side, Amtrak has several large equipment procurements underway and planned. Most especially the critical long-distance procurement initiative. Amtrak also holds options for further Airo train sets and locomotives should Congress provide funding. So, a separate equipment entity would position Amtrak to be the manager of the national equipment pool. RSME might also be in a better position than legacy Amtrak to tap private sector funds to finance additional equipment.

Amtrak is also moving toward train set maintenance for its corridor fleets which is completely divorced from the traditional railroad "fix it when it breaks" maintenance strategy. The new train set maintenance requires new management strategies. Finally, in all its recent equipment procurements, Amtrak has also negotiated a builder maintenance contract; the OEM builder organizing, managing, and supervising equipment maintenance and the Amtrak employees doing the work.

The operating entity seems the least changed. Although what is new with this reorganization and what will be a challenge for the OE will be the interfaces between the OE and the other entities especially when these interfaces are outside the normal flow of business. They could easily turn adversarial. For example, it is three hours before train departure and OE needs a mechanic. Instead of a simple call to the yard, now OE must coordinate it through the RSME. Things will be similar when dealing with train slots during a construction project. What happens when there is a late train?

On the negative side, the three-entity concept holds promise but will there be sufficient funding for the entities to deliver their products, good track and working equipment to the operating entity? The other major question is this just a scheme to privatize segments of Amtrak? Currently the operating surplus of the NEC is used to offset operating losses of the other services, giving Amtrak a better topline result than if each business unit reported separately. There are opportunists who have their eye on the NEC operating surplus to finance their privatized NEC operations. Also, these opportunists could easily set up the RSME as a profit center, as was done in Britain in the 1990's, charging OE lease costs for use of its equipment resulting in increased route operating costs.

The one wild card here is the freight railroads. Some railroads have clearly stated that Amtrak's legacy rights and avoidable cost access payments for use cannot be transferred to any other entity, public or private. The holding company concept is clearly an attempt to skirt this issue. Will the freight railroads agree, or will this reorg be tied up in court for the next 10-years?

Finally, Amtrak over the years has adopted policies and reorganizations to adapt to current political winds and survive the churning waters. In doing so Amtrak tries to influence the outcome. Is this a similar situation?

The suspension of the bi-level equipment procurement brings much disappointment. It is the second manufacturing supply chain failure western train riders have seen. The first was the state procurement of bi-level cars for the state funded trains. If fully carried to the western long-distance trains, it means that there will be no elevated scenery viewing area on these routes. The Rail Passengers Association has an excellent overview and discussion of the proposed concept based on what is currently known at Less Risky, Less Costly: Amtrak's New LD Strategy (Rail Passengers Association)

While this initiative promises to bring new equipment into service quicker and with less expense there are some downsides. While the new equipment will bring maintenance expense savings and reliability benefits it will also result in increased costs (bi-level trains or forgone cost savings on current single-level trains). Single-level trains require more assistant conductors, can require more food service cars, and increase overhead costs where those costs are allocated based on the number of cars using a facility.

I hope Amtrak can maintain the Accessible Core concept in the new single-level fleet (they did have designs that were shown initially). The Accessible Core is key to a separate diner and lounge car and allowing wider seats and wider compartments outside of the accessible core. I also hope they can retain some of the new designs for a wider array of passenger accommodations.

Unfortunately, rail riders have already seen the less costly, available sooner rail cars on their trains, the Siemens Venture cars. These "contract failure settlement" rail cars were the result of the Nippon Sharyo bi-level failure. The big question is who will dominate the Amtrak single-level car procurement, will it be the "passenger experience" design team, or like the Venture Cars will the financial teams at the sponsoring agency (Amtrak) and the FRA dominate?

I also find the question on elevators a "red herring". There are full-size elevators in California Café Cars, Stadler Rocky Mountaineer bi-levels, Alaska Railroad Gold Class bi-levels and on cruise ships which often face very rough sea conditions.

In the end Amtrak staff should be applauded for crafting a signature, experiential product vision for the long-distance train that tried to balance the accessibility requirements with a design that maintained traditional features, separate diner and lounge cars, wide seats and wide compartments all while maximizing the revenue productivity similar to the current Superliner fleet. Ride and enjoy the Superliners while you can.

Update on the Union Pacific / Norfolk Southern Merger

Steve Roberts

In the Winter 2025 Steel Wheels I provided an overview and some forward-learning initiatives UP could take that would smooth the merger's approval. Union Pacific has filed its merger application with the Surface Transportation Board (STB) and instead of making proactive proposals to smooth the merger, they instead chose a far more aggressive strategy.

Union Pacific's strategy for fulfilling the competitive and public service requirements of the new merger rules is to note that the strong projected post-merger growth in rail traffic fulfills these requirements through enhanced competition. UP Forecasts a 12% growth projection with 75% of that growth shifting from the highway to rail. This shift would generate revenue growth of $4.2 Billion. UP also forecasts that the merger would also leverage the growth potential of the Midwest "Watershed Market" the area on either side of the Mississippi River separated by rail company interchanges.

However, UP compounds this "trust me" strategy by presenting very limited analytics around the forecasts of rail traffic growth and a shift of freight from highways to rail. Although UP offers to keep all current gateway interchange points open, except for ownership changes to two terminal railroads, UP offers no other concessions such line sales, trackage rights, etc. This is despite forecasting early in the merger process that it saw $750 million in concessions to stakeholders to facilitate the merger.

To address concerns about avoiding a "merger meltdown" UP highlights an Information Technology and technology system integration investment of $1.1 billion. UP also lists $1.1 billion in yard and mainline capacity investments. Much of the mainline investment is focused on the Golden State Route, the former Wabash Line from Kansas City to Detroit and the Norfolk Southern Line between New Orleans and Atlanta.

Union Pacific's original merger application only generally referred to passenger service. While Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern settled their on-time performance cases with Amtrak, the merger application failed to leverage passenger service as an opportunity to provide significant public benefits. All the application said was that the "existing track infrastructure has sufficient capacity to support the projected increased freight schedules while maintaining current passenger operations." There was no discussion regarding the proposed daily Sunset Ltd. or Cardinal (Alexandria, VA to Orange, VA) and whether the proposed network could handle this priority expansion. There was also no mention of other proposed routes, such as the proposed leg of the Crescent Ltd. from Meridian, MS to Dallas, TX, or others outlined in FRA's Amtrak Long-Distance Service Study. And there is no settlement with Chicago's Metra.

One of Union Pacific's major challenges is the lack of confidence in ability to achieve a smooth merger transition and that UP, under Wall Street pressure, will quickly pivot to a yield/operating ratio focused strategy. Stakeholders are concerned about long-term service issues and UP seeking only high-yielding long-distance traffic and not growing the business across the board.

The merger application drew mixed reactions from organized labor and shippers. Organized labor was split with SMART-TD (conductors, brakemen, and switchmen), Brotherhoods of Railway Carmen, Boilermakers, Firemen and Oilers and Yardmasters all found the promise of no furloughs and guaranteed life-time employment very appealing and support the merger. Other unions, the Brotherhoods of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen and Maintenance of Way employees and American Train Dispatchers Association oppose the merger with concerns around a lack of seniority protections and the need to transfer to other locations in order to maintain the guarantee of life-time employment. There was also concern about UP's efforts around leasing trackage and yards to short lines and what would happen to current workers at those facilities.

The International Association of Machinists and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers are all still in talks with UP. All told about half of the combined UP/NS workforce support the merger while about half oppose it.

Shippers are also split. Some like the American Chemistry Council and Alliance for Chemical Distribution have come out against the merger. The intermodal companies, with the flexibility of a dray to anywhere, are generally supportive. Other shippers on-line UP to on-line NS support the merger. Most shippers are "wait and see," open to supporting the merger if UP proposes additional initiatives that increase competitive choices.

Union Pacific's one concession to shippers is Committed Gateway Pricing (CGP) that appears to address Bottleneck Rail Rates. UP says it will keep all existing interchanges open and offer competitive rates for those interchanges. If UP outlines a process that fully carries out CGP shipper support will increase. But shippers want a robust Reciprocal Switching proposal and need further convincing that UP has fully planned and invested to avoid a "Merger Meltdown."

With CPKCS and BNSF leading the pack, the freight railroads have come out against the merger. They have pointed out shortcomings in the forecasts for post-merger traffic predictions, the lack of concessions, no estimates for market share and the lack of clarity of downstream impacts of the merger. Drew Robertson of Atlantic Systems noted that the merger application does not include the costs ($2.69 billion) intermodal partners will have to invest to accommodate the intermodal traffic growth. The investment required to shift from truck to the rail carload mode is probably an issue for other truck focused shippers as well. Slower mode shift due to this "investment friction" is another key risk that UP did not address in its projections.

Partnerships are the alternative highlighted as an option to a merger by the other railroads and some have been inaugurated even before the merger. However, it is ironic that these same partnerships did not develop in two decades of the current rail governance and only began when the merger was announced. So now, because of the merger announcement, there is more rail

competition which somewhat counters the other rail companies' argument that the merger will reduce competition.

Amtrak has yet to weigh in publicly regarding the merger. As was noted above, Amtrak has settled two on-time performance cases, one at the STB with UP and one in Federal court with NS. But no details on those settlements has been released so it is hard to judge the impact of the merger.

In the end STB rejected UP's initial merger application as in-complete. UP tried to "bluster" its way through the merger process and the STB called them on it. UP is now working on an updated version to be filed April 30th. The STB found the following shortcomings:

1. UP's "application does not contain future market share projections showing the combined effects of merger-related growth, diversions and other merger influenced market changes". The UP must provide market share projections beyond the merger date.
2. Failure to provide the entire merger agreement between the two railroads.
3. The application treated the restructuring the of ownership of the Terminal Railroad Association of St. Louis as a minor transaction whereas the Board finds it is a major transaction requiring a more detailed application.
4. Definition of the "materially burdensome regulatory condition" that would cause the merger to be terminated.

It should be noted that this ruling was not an indication of the Board's views of the merger but only the completeness of its application.

In addition, perhaps providing a hint at what is minimally required to meet the new merger rules, the STB issued a proposed rulemaking for Reciprocal Switching that would simplify and streamline the current process and bring it in line with the intent of the Staggers Act of 1980. The proposed rule would eliminate the requirement that captive one railroad shippers show "anticompetitive conduct" in order to get directed access to another railroad.

Under the streamlined rules the shipper served by one railroad asks the STB to require that railroad to interchange the shipper's cars to a second railroad at the closest interchange point. The STB can require railroads to establish through routes and to establish multi-carrier rates for these through routes.

This should broaden access to Reciprocal Switching. Under the old rules no shipper access had ever been achieved. UP has said it would support the proposed rule change. Still outstanding is how complex and time consuming the process will be. One question, was the timing of this rulemaking a coincidence or is the STB sending a "expand competition" message to the freight railroads and specifically the UP?

So, what are the major changes to look for in the revised merger proposal. Will UP propose any competition initiatives envisioned with its pre-application forecast of $750 million in concessions?

Passenger:
Will there be any information reconciling the disconnect where prior requests for additional passenger service required substantial capital investment, but the merger analysis indicates

sufficient capacity over the same lines to handle several additional priority freight trains? Will the proposed Daily Sunset Ltd. and Daily Cardinal be addressed?

Competition:
Will the UP take the next step and eliminate Paper Barriers for short lines?
Based on past merger requests and STB cases we have some idea of the priority trackage rights requests by other railroads. They are:

1. CPKCS from Springfield, Il to Northern Indiana and Michigan.
2. CPKCS access from former CP lines to the Port of Houston (former KCS points were given that access as an outgrowth of the UP/SP merger).
3. CN from St. Louis or Springfield to Kansas City, KS.
4. CN from Baton Rouge to Houston and Gulf Coast petrochemical shippers.

Infrastructure:
Union Pacific plans additional train frequencies on key segments of its network. While there are capacity projects outlined, it would seem, as a confidence builder, that additional capacity projects would be well received by stakeholders – especially on the single-track segments east and west of Yuma, on the Norfolk Southern Line between Meridian and Atlanta and addressing the single bridge over the Neches River at Beaumont, TX. Finally, UP and CPKCS have a dispute before the STB regarding the mismatch of train and siding lengths on the Meridian Speedway between Shreveport, LA and Meridian, MS. This route is identified as a major growth corridor for the merged company. A UP investment in siding extensions to settle this dispute would seem to be a wise strategy.

Given the impact of this merger on the rail industry, it is a major event. As a result, there will be additional updates in future issues of Steel Wheels.

California High-Speed Rail – 2026, A Year of Transition

Steve Roberts

For California High-Speed 2025 was a year of contrasts. In review, 2025 featured:

- The slog and grind of routine civil works construction,
- A setback with the canceling of significant Federal Grants critical to completing the Merced to Bakersfield segment.
- Success with the assurance of a guaranteed yearly appropriation of Cap & Trade funds through 2045 ($20 Billion). This long-term state funding assures the completion of the Merced – Bakersfield segment and back-stops future private investment,
- And a surprise when the authority walked away from the withheld Federal Grants despite winning round-one of the court cases.

Moving into 2026 there will be several key benchmarks that will clearly move the project forward. Civil works will be in the "homestretch" during 2026. The railhead storage yard near Wasco for the marshalling of track construction commodities – rail, ties, ballast, catenary poles, etc. – is completed and receiving deliveries. By the time you read this all-non-railroad property required for the project will have been acquired. Due to inaccurate utility maps additional small pieces of property have had to be acquired late in the utility relocation process to accommodate the relocation. The last of the utility relocations will be completed by the summer of 2026.

By the summer of 2026 83% percent of the highway overpasses and underpasses should be completed with construction of the remainder well underway. Also, by the summer 85% of the guideway will have been completed with the remainder underway. The goal for civil work is completion of guideway by the Fall of 2026 so that track construction can begin. The other civil work that will continue, paving overpasses, landscaping underpasses, etc. is programmed not impede track construction. Finally, all the intensive route level environmental studies, San Francisco to Anaheim, will be completed.

The key 2026 milestones will be:

- First Quarter 2026, conclusion of trainset bid evaluation.
- Second Quarter 2026, Request for Interest in a private/public project for solar and battery storage facilities for train and facilities power.
- June 2026, Track and Systems award for track and overhead catenary construction.
- June 2026, Award for a Co-Development Private Sector Partner.
- Third Quarter, Merced and Bakersfield extensions Design/Build contract for the final detailed design portion and construction awarded.
- Fourth Quarter, Award of the Design-Build contract for the Fresno Station concourse and platforms. The former Southern Pacific Station, currently being refurbished, will be the city side entrance and gateway to the new facility.
- Fourth Quarter, Procurement of Design-Build for the Operations Control Center, and Central trainset Maintenance Facility.
- Fourth Quarter, Request for Interest for the Pacheco Pass and Tehachapi Tunnels.
- Fourth Quarter, Construction begins for the Fresno Railhead to receive track construction commodities.

- Fourth Quarter, Detailed Track and System Design for CP-4 Shafter north (21 miles) completed and track sub-grade finishing and site preparation work begins.

2026 will also mark the implementation of the strategic pivot of the project, enabled by the yearly guaranteed appropriation, looking beyond just the Merced – Bakersfield Interim Operation Segment to focusing on partnering with the private sector in extending high-speed service from Chowchilla to Gilroy and Bakersfield to Palmdale. This will enable the high-speed rail to reach the largest population centers of the state with the concurrent substantial increase in ridership and ticket revenues.

Also, in 2026 the California High-Spead Rail Authority will be working with the California State Legislature for changes to streamline project requirements resulting in lower costs and an expediated project timeline. Those changes should make partnerships with the private sector more attractive. Some of these legislative changes sought are:

- Streamlining and time-limits for local municipal construction permits and utility relocation agreements.
- Exemption of solar and battery storage facilities on Authority owned land from the California Environmental Quality Act.
- State sales tax exemption for commodities purchased by the Authority.
- Allowing the Authority greater land use flexibility and the ability to utilize value-capture mechanisms.
- Encroachment permitting authority.
- Develop procedures within California State Courts to create a level of expertise among a select group of key judges who become experts in eminent domain right-of-way cases.

Rediscovering Orange County, One Station at a Time

David Peter Alan, Railway Age Contributing Editor

CULTURE OC

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From Clock Tower to Koreatown, Buena Park's Metrolink Station Has Plenty Worth Stopping For

Surrounded by housing yet full of surprises, Buena Park's Metrolink station offers history, charm and nearby attractions worth the walk.

The clock tower and gazebo greet visitors at the Buena Park Metrolink Station. Photo by Joel Beers, Culture OC

One year ago, Metrolink – the five-county commuter rail system Orange County joined in 1994 – rolled out the biggest expansion in its history.

With ridership still hovering at barely half its pre-pandemic levels, the system shifted from a commuter service to a regional transportation network. This means more trains, especially midday and later at night, better transfers between its seven lines, and greater flexibility for riders to see Metrolink stations not just as launch pads or places between their final destination, but as destinations themselves.

No line has felt that shift more than the Orange County Line, Metrolink's second busiest. Running from Los Angeles' Union Station to Oceanside, with 11 stops inside the county, it added seven weekday trains, including one that now leaves Union Station at 10 p.m.

So with the county suddenly easier to criss-cross by rail, at least along a route that mostly shadows the 5 freeway, the question becomes: What's worth stopping for?

In the coming weeks, Culture OC will try to answer that. Each story will spotlight one or two stations: from the architecturally striking (Santa Ana, Anaheim), to the ones at the heart of lively downtowns (Fullerton, Orange, San Juan Capistrano), and even those that, at first blush, seem to be just there.

But each station is unique, whether due to its history, design, location or how to get beyond the platforms, whether it's walking to nearby landmarks or catching a bus to hotspots like Disneyland, John Wayne Airport or the coast.

We'll take the tour north to south, from Buena Park down to San Clemente.

Illustration by Kaitlin Wright, Culture OC

First stop: Buena Park

Although the first stop on the first railroad to nose into what would eventually become Orange County – the Southern Pacific, in 1875 – was in present-day Buena Park (where Orangethorpe Avenue now crosses Dale Street), and two more were built in the late 1880s, by 1964 the city's last depot was shuttered. For nearly 50 years, the only way to ride a train in Buena Park was on the two preserved at Walter Knott's Ghost Town – a short trip guaranteed to end in a bandit holdup.

But in the late 1980s, as Orange County joined the region's push to create a commuter rail system, Buena Park planned its comeback. But it would take 13 years after the Orange County line opened in 1994 for rail passenger service to return to Buena Park.

When it finally did, the station was unlike any other in the county, blending history, charm and even a touch of "Twilight Zone" strangeness.

Location: Houses, Houses Everywhere

The first thing you notice about the station is that it's surprisingly easy to miss. Unlike most of the county's Metrolink stops – set downtown or alongside freeways – Buena Park's is tucked just south of Malvern Avenue and Dale Street, about a mile from Beach Boulevard and 2.5 miles from the nearest freeway exit. Housing hugs it on all four sides.

Its very existence stems from a housing partnership with Cal State Fullerton. In 2002, the city acquired 12 acres of barren flood-control land, gave eight to the university for affordable faculty housing, and used the remaining four acres for the station. The university built the housing; the city collects property taxes.

Encircled by townhomes, condos and single-family residences, the station is a miniature transit village – residential life organized around a rail hub. From the outside it feels tucked away, almost secret. But that seclusion also makes it the most relaxing of O.C.'s 11 stations, adding to its curious charm.

Key Features of the Buena Park Metrolink Station include the clock tower (modeled after the one at Knott's Berry Farm and Philadelphia's Independence Hall), the gazebo (with its backdrop of towering palm trees, illustrating the blend of the station's old-school Americana and Southern California topography) and the pedestrian bridge (with sleek modern functionality and small-town Americana that typifies the station's design). Photos by Joel Beers, Culture OC

Design: Modern Meets Retro

The second thing you notice is its design, which blends modern functionality with a touch of "The Twilight Zone." The pedestrian overpass – glass panels, open sightlines – feels thoroughly 21st century, as do the LED lighting and platforms. But the dominant feature is a 70-foot clock tower topped with a weathervane. Add the gazebo, old-style lighting and the station's remarkable cleanliness, and it feels like you've stepped into Willoughby from the 1959-64 TV show – or the Americana section of an amusement park. That's no accident: The tower nods to

Walter Knott's clock tower at Knott's Berry Farm, itself a brick-by-brick replica of Philadelphia's Independence Hall. More than functional, it lends the stop civic charm, hinting at history and place, not just transit.

Surrounding Neighborhood: No Easy Stroll

Getting to Buena Park's main attraction, Knott's Berry Farm, takes 35-40 minutes by bus, 18 minutes by bike, or about an hour and 10 minutes on foot. Not exactly a marathon, but this walk in the (Buena) Park is no scenic stroll either – just a mile of housing and pavement between you and anything interesting.

Two points of interest lie about a mile away in opposite directions. Southeast is Fullerton Municipal Airport, the county's only general aviation field, with history dating back to 1913. It hums with Cessnas, Pipers, twin-engine props, the odd corporate jet and a squadron of helicopters. It's no John Wayne airport – more like a living model train set with wings, where the small stuff steals the show. You can also charter a helicopter, take a flying lesson, or grab a meal at Wings Café, where some rave about the breakfasts and others rave about its beer and wine selection.

About a mile northeast is the northern end of Orange County's newest official ethnic community: Buena Park's Koreatown. Scores of restaurants, grocery stores and retail stores and services line the four corners of Malvern and Beach, stretching nearly two miles down Beach Boulevard to The Source, an epicenter of Korean culture in Southern California. The city designated the stretch as Koreatown two years ago, but it became truly official Aug. 25 when a road sign was placed on the 5 Freeway.

Strip malls along Beach Boulevard in Buena Park are full of the Korea businesses that make up Koreatown. Photos by Joel Beers, Culture OC

Word to the wise

Until last year, any excursion from Buena Park's Metrolink station had to wrap up early: The last train on the Orange County line heading south left at 7:08 p.m. and 5:54 p.m. heading north. But last year's Metrolink

expansion increased the number of weekday trains stopping at Buena Park from nine to 13, and southbound trains now leave as late as 10:12 p.m., while the last northbound train is at 8:12 p.m.

Saturdays and Sundays remain tight, however, as there are still only four trains that stop at Buena Park, with the last southbound train departing at 4:58 p.m. and the last northbound leaving at 6:21 p.m.

(Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner doesn't stop at Buena Park, but its last southbound train from Fullerton departs at 10:41 p.m. daily, and its last northbound train leaves Fullerton at 11:18 p.m.

In other words, make your reservation in Koreatown early on weekends and consider a ride share to Fullerton if eating dinner there or if Knott's Scary Farm is your destination.

Must Sees

Glenn Ranch: Not really a ranch, but a remnant of one. This half-acre produce stand sits across Dale Street from the station. Once part of a 200-acre farm worked by the Glenn family since 1974, the land was razed in the 1990s for housing. Residents successfully lobbied the city to preserve a slice of it, and today the stand sells strawberries from the Glenns' Chino farm and peaches from Reedley. *5702 Dale St., open March through September, hours vary.*

H Mart and **Zion Market:** Buena Park's sprawling Koreatown is a mecca for foodies, with nearly 100 dining options from Korean BBQ and over-the-top desserts to bingsoo and bulgogi pizza, straddling 2.5 miles of Beach Boulevard. But these two markets, located about a mile from the station, are also culturally immersive experiences. H Mart provides a pan-Asian experience, with Korean, Japanese, Chinese and other Asian ingredients, while Zion Market focuses more on Korean products. Both let visitors shop for fresh ingredients, specialty sauces and ready-to-eat meals, giving a broader taste of Asian cuisine than any single restaurant can offer. *H Mart: 5111 Beach Blvd., Open daily 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Zion Market, 5400 Beach Blvd., open daily, 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.*

Knott's Chicken Dinner Restaurant: Hip, it isn't. But for 89 years, this Buena Park classic has served Cordelia Knott's original four-ingredient recipe: bird, oil, flour and salt. Nostalgia infuses its eight themed dining rooms, among which are the cozy Tea Room, rustic Panty, Western Farmhouse hall and outdoor patio. Two things have changed: In the 1950s, the restaurant phased out lard, and a chicken dinner that as late as 1991 cost $7.99 now starts at $26.50, a 35-fold increase from the original 65 cents. *8039, Beach Blvd., open daily 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.*

Another station?

Shortly after the Buena Park station opened, it was announced that it was in the sights of the California high-speed rail project, whose proposal for an electrified line connecting Los Angeles to Anaheim would require the relocation of the station and possible demolition of 25 condominiums. The new station would be located about three-quarters of a mile northeast of the existing one.

As of now, the final decision on the station's relocation is pending, with ongoing discussions and planning; then again, considering the travails of the California bullet train, who knows when or if any decision will ever be made.

Buena Park Metrolink Station

Address: 8400 Lakeknoll Drive, Buena Park

Opened: September 2007

Cost: $14 million

Parking: 302 spots

Ridership: 305 average weekday boardings

Amenities: Public restrooms

Route: Fourth stop, and first in Orange County, on the OC Line, which runs from Los Angeles Union Station to Oceanside; also part of Perris/91 line, which runs from Perris to Los Angeles.

Train Schedule*

Weekdays: 26 trains. First southbound train (from Los Angeles) arrives at 6:12 a.m; last southbound train arrives at 10:12 p.m. First northbound train arrives at 5:49 a.m.; final northbound train arrives at 8:39 p.m.

Weekends: Six trains. First southbound train arrives 9:10 a.m.; last southbound train arrives at 7:51 p.m. First northbound train arrives 8:44 a.m.; last northbound train arrives 7 p.m.

**subject to change*

Amtrak: no service

Bus Connections: OCTA routes 29A, 123.

Part One – Summary

Let's face it: Intercity travel in the U.S. today has become a miserable experience.

Highways are crowded and dangerous, killing 42 thousand travelers per year. Non-highway travel modes are safer and usually faster, but they suffer from limitations of their own.

The ostensibly speediest mode, commercial air travel, fails to live up to its promise for shorter trips because of elements that prolong the actual door-to-door travel time. Most American airports can be accessed only by highway. Time driving to the airport and parking plus long check-in lines adds considerable travel time in all but airports serving smaller cities and metro areas.

The third and *potentially most effective* travel mode, intercity passenger trains, barely exists in the U.S. Frequencies are few, trains are slow, and schedule-keeping is unreliable. Unlike highways and aviation, passenger rail in the U.S. suffers from a fragmented service with too few routes and frequencies. It further lacks a comprehensive, interconnected network to form a system comparable to highways and aviation.

Highways and aviation also enjoy well-funded, government-owned infrastructure, which invites participation by multiple and often competing private interests. Passenger rail suffers from a unique "dual monopoly" on routes outside the Northeast Corridor (NEC), infrastructure is supplied primarily by one or more private host freight railroads while Amtrak is the only intercity operator of trains. Amtrak is in a unique position to negotiate for access to deliver limited passenger services, but at great cost to the public and riders. The need is increasingly for dedicated passenger service tracks, which a few states have been able to advance with support from federal partners. Other countries have benefitted when these passenger tracks are made available through "open access" to competitive passenger rail ventures.

In much of the nation today, intercity passenger travel choices are few, expensive, slow, unreliable, and inconvenient. Many places are now transportation deserts as public transportation atrophies. Deregulation of airlines gave us more competition and low fares for a time, but then a wave of consolidations and cost-cutting led to a significant reduction in service to smaller cities, more forced transfers, longer layovers, crowded airports and planes, and fewer amenities. Intercity bus service has been declining for 60 years. Greyhound stations are being sold and stops moved to more remote locations that are less transit-accessible.

Likewise, urban public transit is neither convenient nor frequent in most cities, does not reach large parts of the metro areas they serve, and does not always connect well with intercity transportation modes.

Rail passenger service has shrunk to a sub-skeletal level that leaves many cities off the map and operates once or less daily in much of the country. Several states are only served at night. Outside of the NEC and a few state-supported services, trains are infrequent, slow, late, and worn out.

Our national rail passenger system is at a crossroad. While a majority of Americans support more and better passenger rail service, the model the country uses to provide it is deeply flawed and incapable of developing a robust, modern network. Responsibilities are left to individual states or rare multistate coalitions to deliver service. We are left with a great need for a national vision with dedicated capital and operating funding to advance interstate planning and investment.

This leaves the auto as the only practical form of transportation for the vast majority of trips over distances shorter than 300 miles. Yet, because most travelers are forced to drive, we are paying in the form of large personal investment in the ownership and maintenance of automobiles, an overwhelmed highway system, huge costs for highway maintenance and new lane-miles, inefficient structures for personal and business travel, along with societal costs such as asthma induced by vehicle exhaust in urban areas, noise pollution, over 2 ¼ million car accident injuries annually[1] (many life-altering), and hazardous travel conditions.

Perhaps most dangerous of all, and paradoxically in a nation with a huge highway and airline system, large areas of the U.S. are effectively becoming isolated, leaving the U.S. drifting toward the formation of two national cultures—one consisting of urban areas with more jobs, amenities, transportation, service and education access, and the other made up of struggling rural areas and small cities with few amenities and no transportation options other than driving.

An invigorated passenger rail industry can help reconnect the country.[2] In particular, it can help restore a vigorous small-town life, which is essential to the nation's cultural and political health. Aviation and highway travel may be abetting this divide by forcing economic activity out of town by the Interstate or the nearest airport. Other countries have settled into a natural investment balance between highway, air, and passenger rail modes. Our country's transportation investment mix is decidedly unbalanced. This in spite of the fact that population and job densities in the US megaregions are comparable to Europe and, in some places, Asia.

A network of robust, market-responsive passenger rail services in the US would:

- Alleviate pressure on over-burdened highway and aviation systems.
- Provide more transportation freedom throughout the country, especially as the cost of driving is increasingly a financial burden on American households.[3]
- Improve the travel experience by creating more choices, with modern passenger rail services with the speed, frequency, personal comforts, and amenities desired by the public.
- Address generational changes which have brought about a market shift that demands more options to driving.[4]
- Maintain mobility for individuals who can't or don't want to drive.

- Contribute to the revitalization of downtowns in cities large and small through economic development and job creation around station sites.
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions while promoting development. Passenger rail investments promote development and economic growth while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving quality of life for citizens by offering them more freedom to choose how they want to travel.

The root of the problem with our passenger rail system is the policy inequity between how our highway and aviation systems are structured and how our passenger rail system is structured. Until this policy inequity is addressed, the U.S. passenger rail system will remain slow, skeletal, unreliable, and unable to reach its full potential. **There is no tinkering with Amtrak's enabling legislation that will result in growth and modernization of passenger rail without comprehensive federal policy reform.**

Fixing America's passenger rail system will require:

1. Establishing a permanent, dedicated funding mechanism that is comparable in size and scope to the Highway Trust Fund.
2. Constructing dedicated, publicly-owned tracks for passenger trains that are segregated from private freight traffic.
3. Opening the publicly-owned, passenger-only tracks to private competition through franchising and bidding.
4. Creating new alignments where curvy, 19th-century infrastructure prevents trains from offering automobile-competitive speeds.
5. Creating a federal passenger rail program that functions as well as the federal highway and aviation programs.
6. Creating a stronger federal role (note: stronger does not mean exclusive) in the establishment of interstate passenger rail routes and services, rather than relying solely on states. A national passenger rail authority is suggested as a possible mechanism to accomplish this.
7. Building a comprehensive passenger rail network that allows people to travel throughout the nation like they are able to do with the interstate highway and aviation networks.
8. Streamlining the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to remove unnecessary hurdles and speed up projects.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The United States lags behind nearly every other developed nation (and an increasing number of developing ones) in the quality of its passenger rail network. Plagued by lack of investment in infrastructure and reliance on a model that is incapable of delivering a modern, robust network, we have a system that, outside of the Northeast Corridor, is slow, infrequent, and far too skeletal to capture a significant share of the U.S. travel market (or to further the national unity that mass mobility systems historically have sustained).

The History that Brought Us the Current Passenger Rail Network and Management

Historically, the U.S. relied on a model of private investment to develop passenger and freight rail capabilities. Because the young republic lacked capital for public works, it turned to private capitalists in Europe for the funds necessary for developing the new rail technology. From the 1830s forward, virtually all U.S. railroads were built by private corporations, and while many of them competed from end to end—such as New York to St. Louis—they also exerted monopoly power because most cities between major end points were served by only one railroad, so most

passengers and most of the industries that relied on rail transportation had access to only one carrier.

This model worked until government capital became available to finance infrastructure for competing modes. Private capital developed the automobile and the airplane, but it was government capital that built the infrastructure on which they operate. It was this government investment that made them available to the public. The result was that air and highway travel became increasingly more effective in the market. Railroads did not decline solely because of a market outcome. When one industry that is dependent upon private capital has to compete with industries that receive generous public capital; and where the public sector owns the infrastructure, the industry that is dependent upon privately-financed, privately-owned infrastructure cannot effectively compete.

Furthermore, the railroads were subject to a unique liability from which their air and highway competitors were spared: they had to pay county property taxes on every foot of operating right-of-way they owned. It was a contest the privately-operated passenger trains could not win.

The result of this disparity was the decline of American passenger rail service. By 1970 it was on its deathbed. It was then that Congress stepped in and began debating what became known as the Rail Passenger Service Act (RailPax) that created Amtrak, which began operating a much downsized and skeletal system of passenger trains on May 1, 1971.

The problem with RailPax is that it did nothing to address the inequities between how public policy treats highways and aviation compared to passenger rail. This is why American passenger rail development continues to languish compared to other nations and why Amtrak's service remains skeletal, slow, and unreliable. If we want to succeed in developing a modern, robust, national passenger rail network, we must emulate the highway and aviation models with generously funded passenger rail-only tracks on which private operators can compete to offer service.

Other Structural Flaws of the Existing Model

- Amtrak's enabling legislation is not designed to foster growth and deliver the nation a robust, modern, national system of passenger trains. It was designed to take over a fraction of the passenger rail network that once existed and run it on private railroad infrastructure that, outside of the NEC, has been significantly downsized and is best suited for freight service.
- It lacks the key components that have made the highway and aviation systems successful:
    1. A well-funded, dedicated federal trust fund to build dedicated, public infrastructure for passenger trains;
    2. A federal entity with a clear mandate to consult with states on the design of a modern, robust national network and fund its construction.
- Lack of vision. Amtrak generally argues that passenger rail service can only be expanded if states ask for it and pay for it. Because of the absence of a coherent federal program with dedicated funding and a clear vision for modernization and growth, it's the easiest place for Amtrak to go if they want to expand service. It's problematic because there is no overall national vision for passenger rail service. Furthermore, adjacent states often disagree strongly on the need for passenger rail service, with one or more critical states refusing to help fund a needed buildup on a multi-state corridor. The following are examples:
    1. The popular *Wolverine* service between Chicago and Detroit, which is supported by Illinois and Michigan, is stuck at three daily round trips in part because Indiana has elected not to support the service. A shared investment is needed to improve track conditions, availability and reliability between the Chicago city limits and Porter, Indiana (where Amtrak line ownership extends into

Michigan). Indiana also has elected not to support investments in passenger service in the Chicago-Indianapolis-Louisville and Chicago-Indianapolis-Cincinnati corridors, inhibiting economic development in a potentially booming cluster of Midwestern cities.
2. New Hampshire has not contributed to the development and operation of the Downeaster Corridor between Boston, MA and Portland ME.
3. Development of the Gulf Coast Corridor between Mobile, AL and New Orleans, LA has suffered years of delays, in part because the state of Alabama has not committed funds to the project. The city of Mobile has been left to fund the state's share, but disagreements that have occurred on the city council have caused delays.[5]

In addition, Amtrak must ask Congress every year for the funding required to operate the existing system while often dealing with a few legislators—and occasionally Presidents—who threaten to zero out its funding. The result is that Amtrak's budget is subject to political compromise which, more often than not, provides the company with just enough funding to keep the existing system running but not enough to expand frequencies, build high-speed corridors, or integrate discrete lines into a true and reliable network where trains make tightly scheduled connections at key junctions. In fact, Amtrak's annual appropriation is so small and its legislative remit so murky that the company finds it difficult to keep equipment in a state of good repair or improve speed and reliability outside of the NEC.

A federal role is necessary to overcome competing state interests and clear the way to implement interstate projects. The Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution applies here[6]. Federal funding is also important because federal spending priorities influence the programs in which the states are willing to invest. History has proven this with passenger rail. There have been only two times since Amtrak's creation when state interest in passenger rail has surged beyond the few states that already fund trains. The first was after the passage American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which provided $8 billion for passenger rail development. State applications for federal funding exceeded the funds available. The second time was following the passage of the in Infrastructure and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021, which provided $66 billion. As of January 2025, approximately half of IIJA funds have been committed, and this funding supports 69 ongoing studies for new and enhanced intercity passenger rail services nationally.

In the next issue of Steel Wheels look forward to Part 2:

RESTRUCTURING PASSENGER RAIL IN THE UNITED STATES

The authors wish to thank:

James Coston, Executive Chairman, Corridor Rail Development Corporation and one-time member of the former Amtrak Reform Council, Also a thank you to F.K.Pious

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MASCOTS Comes to the North Bay

Doug Kerr

As I have said many times, each public transportation agency is responsible for their own piece of the puzzle, but NO ONE is responsible for making the pieces fit together. There are many instances, such as a train arriving five minutes after a bus departs, where connections between different agencies are impossible. A person just trying to get somewhere can easily conclude it is easier to drive their own car.

The two counties immediately north of the Golden Gate Bridge have a plan to fix this dilemma. The project is called MASCOTS, an acronym for Marin-Sonoma Coordinated Transit Service Plan. From the start this was not to be yet another study collecting dust on a shelf, but a plan that actually would be implemented improving local public transportation and giving people a viable alternative to driving.

Marin and Sonoma Counties are served by the SMART train operating along the US highway 101 corridor between Larkspur in Marin County and Windsor in Sonoma County with eventual service to Healdsburg and Cloverdale. The counties are also served by Golden Gate Transit's (GGT) route 101 bus from San Francisco to Santa Rosa. Except during COVID, SMART has enjoyed continued ridership growth since its opening in 2017. Some of this growth, however, came at the expense of GGT bus ridership as many prefer the train to the bus. It made little sense to have two parallel transit services serving the same population centers. The strategy behind MASCOTS was to redeploy resources such that duplication was reduced and frequencies were increased.

Specifics of the plan call for GGT buses to be cut back to San Rafael. Since the San Rafael bus transit center is just across the street from SMART's San Rafael station, transfers between the two are easy. To make the transfers viable, schedules between the two agencies will be coordinated to eliminate instances where one is leaving just before the other arrives. Connections between services will increase to hourly all day with 30 minutes during peak periods. In addition to SMART and GGT, four local city bus services are also part of MASCOTS and will adjust their schedules to connect with SMART trains where the services meet. The plan is slated for initial implementation in April 2026.

To give Bay Area public transportation a test (pre-MASCOTS), I recently used three transit services to attend RailPAC's Northern California luncheon get together in downtown Oakland. I used SMART from Windsor to San Rafael, connected across the street to GGT's bus to the East Bay, and Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) to Oakland. While taking longer than driving, the trip was much less

stressful and cheaper. Full round-trip fare is $33.70; however, my senior fare was only $10 (there are some advantages to getting old!). Driving would be over $40 just for gasoline, parking, and bridge toll and does not include all the other expenses that come with car ownership.

MASCOTS has the potential to increase public transit use significantly by making viable connections between different agencies. If it proves successful, and there is every indication it will be, MASCOTS will become the example other metropolitan areas should follow to convince people to leave their cars at home.

Riding Honolulu's fantastic new Skyline

Brian Yanity

Platform screen doors (PSD) are at all Skyline stations, as seen here at the Kahauiki (Kalihi Transit Center) station, the current eastern terminus of the line.

I have seen the future of American public transit, and it looks a lot like Hawai'i. Work sent me to O'ahu at the beginning of February, and I took the opportunity to ride the full length of the new Skyline – the newest and most technologically advanced rapid transit system in the US.

The fleet of 20 electric third rail powered, four-car Hitachi Rail Italy driverless 'light metro' trains, run on a completely grade-separated (and elevated) rail guideway. Each station has automated sliding glass doors, also called platform screen doors (PSD), for safety. The Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation (HART) Skyline is first US 'full-length' urban rapid transit system fully automated with PSD, though not the only one in North America. The first segment of Montreal's

REM system opened in July 2023 (a month after Skyline) and uses very similar automated technology with PSD. In addition to Honolulu, the Hitachi Rail driverless metro trains (with PSD at all stations) are used on lines in the Italian cities of Brescia, Rome and Milan, along with Taipei, Copenhagen and Thessaloniki, Greece. Other manufacturers offer similar technology. While a relatively rare sight in North America, driverless rail mass transit lines with PSD are becoming increasingly common around the world, and are now the global 'gold standard' for brand new lines. Smaller automated 'people mover' train systems with PSD, have long served major US airports along with a handful of downtown areas and amusement parks. The Sepulveda corridor subway just approved by LA Metro will use similar automated technology from Bechtel (though technically 'heavy' and not 'light' metro), and is scheduled to open in the 2030s. [It should be noted Vancouver started running its first driverless mass-transit trains way back in 1985, and Mexico City in 2016, although these systems do not feature PSD at stations].

I got on at the line's current eastern terminus, the Kahauiki (Middle Street) station, located at the Kalihi Transit Center, where connections are available to three bus-rapid transit lines and over a dozen regular bus routes. Due to the full automation, you can sit in the 'drivers seat' on both ends of each train (like the Vancouver SkyTrain), which I did for the whole round trip. The automated announcements on the trains are both in English and Hawaiian. The trains were not too crowded, though it was the middle of a Sunday afternoon.

The line is elevated mostly at the third-story level, but some viaducts reach 70 feet above the ground. The elevated train affords amazing views for the whole length of the system, with the scenery including industrial and dense residential areas, the beautiful green mountains of the Wai'anae and Ko'olau ranges, the downtown Honolulu skyline, Pearl Harbor, and through about two miles of sugar cane and pineapple fields near the western ('leeward') end of the line. The Honouliuli (Ho'Opili) station, which has a large park-and-ride lot, is completely surrounded by verdant agricultural fields.

The first, westernmost segment opened in mid-2023, and second phase eastward to the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport (Lelepaua station), Ahua (Lagoon Drive) and Kahauiki/Middle Street (Kalihi Transit Center) opened in October 2025. The current operating system is just over 16 miles in length, serves 13 stations, and takes 34 minutes total time to travel end to end. The minimum 15 minutes frequency during is operating hours between 4 AM and 10 PM and 10-minute headways at rush hour peak times. The existing 16-mile system had a cost just over $5 billion, with funding coming 83% from local sources and 17% federal. The third phase, a 3.3 mile extension (with six more stations) downtown Honolulu and Civic Center, is under construction and scheduled to open in 2031, although ongoing litigation between HART and Hitachi over delays and unresolved contract disputes could result in further delays. This next segment is the trickiest and most expensive part of the line to build due to the existing dense urban environment, but with very high potential ridership for the same reason. A fourth phase, an extension further east to Ala Moana near the famed Waikiki beach, is planned but its opening date is still to be determined.

Weekday average ridership on the Skyline has grown to 13,000. The total population of O'ahu is about 1 million, though roughly one-third of that are the areas directly served (less than two miles from a station) by the current length of the Skyline. The island's very densely populated urban areas have long been ripe for public transit. Per-capita transit ridership in greater Honolulu has been among the highest of US metro areas for many years, an impressive feat considering that it was a bus-only transit system until 2023. TheBus system, operated across O'ahu by City and County of Honolulu Department of Transportation Services, had an average weekday ridership at 130,356 November 2025, a 1% increase from 2024, though overall ridership remains about 33% below pre-pandemic levels.

It was a long struggle over the past few decades to get the Skyline built, with many delays, cost overruns and political battles like so many rail and transit projects, but the project's proponents persevered, got it done, and made the dream real after so many said it would never get done. We were honored at the December 2025 Rail Users Network annual meeting to hear this story first hand from HART CEO Lori Kahikina, who managed the project on the home stretch to completion. She acknowledged the difficulties that the project has had in the past, and challenges ahead, but said many project management lessons have been learned.

Whatever the challenges and difficulties encountered during its creation and ongoing expansion, while riding the Skyline I only thought about how good a system it is. It felt like being in the future, and it's kupanaha (marvelous)!

[all photos below by Brian Yanity]

Leaving Keope’ae (UH-West Oahu) station on eastbound train
[on the driverless trains you can sit in the “drivers seat”]

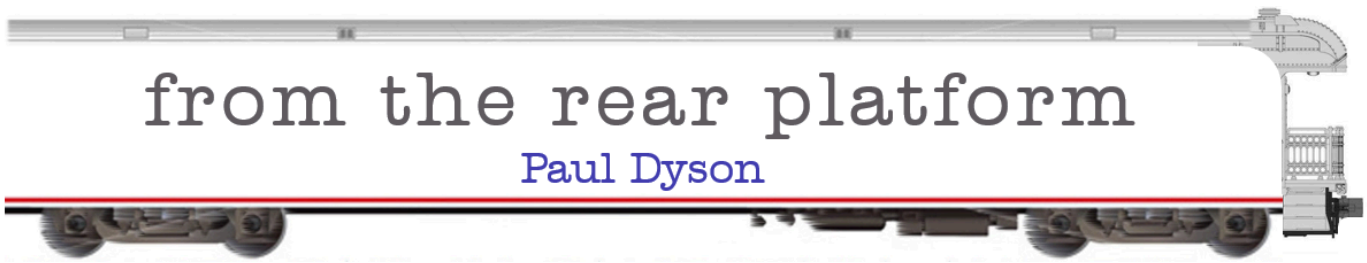
View from near Halawa (Aloha Stadium) station, bottom right is USS Arizona memorial in Pearl Harbor

Open gangway interior of Skyline Hitachi Rail Italy train during brief layover at Kualaka'I (East Kapole), the eastern terminus of the line

Westbound train heading into Honouliuli (Ho'opili) station

Approaching Waiawa (Pearl Highlands) station on eastbound train

Approaching Ahua (Lagoon Drive) station, looking eastward towards downtown Honolulu



This is my last column written in Burbank, as we are relocating to the central coast, specifically Pacific Grove in Monterey County. The Southern Pacific used to run close by on the way to a gravel quarry at Asilomar, now long gone. The right of way is now the Monterey Bay Coastal Trail from Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey, via Cannery Row and across the municipal golf course all the way to where the former right of way ends at Pebble Beach, and to prove its provenance a stranded caboose resides alongside the trail one block from Cannery Row. It's unlikely that we'll see a return of trains to Monterey on the old route from Castroville, so the nearest rail service, freight or passenger, is at Salinas. From my house there is an hourly local bus to the Monterey Transit Plaza and thence a half-hourly limited stop bus to Salinas. The Transit Center at Salinas is not at the Amtrak station, which is about a quarter of a mile away. You can hardly blame them with only one train a day.

We have reported for many years in Steel Wheels the desire of TAMC (Transportation Agency for Monterey County) to extend rail service from San Jose and Gilroy to Salinas on the Union Pacific line. Like a number of similar schemes, Coachella Valley for example, we have been writing about them for many years and seem doomed to continue. In the case of Salinas there are two plans; to extend Caltrain and to extend the Capitol Corridor (CapCor) (see map.) TAMC has committed staff and funding to environmental work for the station and infrastructure at Pajaro-Watsonville. A proposed station at Castroville awaits funding. The route suffers from the same geographic burden as the line segment between San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara, viz. that it is slow and circuitous compared to the parallel highway 101, but perhaps will often be quicker given the congestion on the highway.

https://www.tamcmonterey.org/files/2fdb32dd1/2025+MCRE+Map.pdf

Caltrain has Stadler working on a battery electric train to replace the diesel locomotive hauled commuter cars on the non-electrified segment of Caltrain between San Jose (Tamien) and Gilroy. There is a question whether such a train will have the range to go the additional 37 miles to Salinas with two intermediate stops. Caltrain has 48.9 miles electrified plus 28 miles to Gilroy, so to Salinas 57% of the route would be non-electrified.

With completion of Caltrain electrification I have a hard time figuring the logic of a Caltrain extension from the operating and rolling stock viewpoint, but I've no doubt there is demand for service to Silicon Valley and all the way to San Francisco. However, the original study was based on a traditional am/pm commuter pattern which Covid made obsolete. Equally, there is demand to east bay cities and to Sacramento. As far as extending CapCor is concerned Caltrans is pushing for an extension from San Jose to Salinas with a single round trip using a train set that has a long layover at San Jose. CapCor itself is fully committed with capacity projects to look beyond their legislatively set boundary at San Jose, and indeed they have problems running their existing timetable. The issue for both of these options is the lack of available rolling stock other than the existing Caltrain commuter cars, which do not provide a competitive level of comfort for up to 114 mile journeys!

If we look in detail at the TAMC projects we can see that there are multiple agencies involved in trying to accomplish any progress. These include Union Pacific, Federal Railroad Administration, Federal Transit Administration, California PUC, Caltrans Division of Rail, CapCor JPA , Caltrain JPA, TAMC, and the individual cities wanting stations, including Watsonville/Pajaro, Castroville and Salinas. The original Caltrain extension study was done in 2000. What will it take to translate the plans into construction and train service? Could it be that there are simply too many agencies getting in each other's way? Watch for regular updates as soon as I get my feet under the table in Monterey County.

"Stealing from the next generation"

"Time to stop pretending that discontinuous electrification is a clever innovation when it is actually a millstone around the neck of the next generation."

Ian Walmsley, Modern Railways (UK), March 2026

I am a regular reader of Ian's iconoclastic column. Ian is a strong proponent of electrification but he is concerned that the idea of wiring up the easy bits of railroad and leaving gaps to be bridged by battery power, hydrogen or diesel looks deceptively easy, inexpensive and convenient but has a long-term cost which is not being counted by its proponents. Bi-mode trains are becoming common but that doesn't make them the right choice. The trains are heavier (track wear), more complex to maintain, more expensive, performance is reduced, and turn time is increased by pausing for charging. If a diesel generator is added to extend the range or to "get you home" that's an added cost and complexity. Complexity means higher maintenance cost and higher failure rate.

With battery bi-modes the power system must be robust enough to provide power to the train and to charge the batteries to cover the unwired sections. In the event of a grid failure removing power from a wired section there will be no way to feed it from either side as happens with a fully wired railroad. Batteries need to be charged at each end of the route requiring expensive charging facilities and preferably an automated means to connect them. Fast charging from the overhead is not possible as it would melt the wire. And batteries have a finite life, meaning expensive replacements over time.

We proponents of electrification tout the reliability of electric trains, and the performance which provides faster acceleration and shorter journeys. These advantages are compromised by discontinuous electrification ("DE"). While there may be a case on lightly used routes for a bi-mode train to serve a branch line from an electrified main, as soon as there is any increase in frequency the higher cost of the trains is more than the capital cost of electrification. MBTA in the Boston area seems to be going down this path, with heavy, inefficient bi-mode trains hauling batteries or diesel generators under wires for 80% of the route.

As Walmsley puts it, "how will young engineers of today feel when they retire leaving behind a dog's breakfast of disjointed wiring while their kids scour the globe looking for more lithium?"