

**BSPRA Member Counties**

**Big Horn**

**Broadwater**

**Butte-Silver Bow**

**Carbon**

**Custer**

**Dawson**

**Gallatin**

**Granite**

**Jefferson**

**Lake**

**Mineral**

**Missoula**

**Park**

**Powell**

**Prairie**

**Rosebud**

**Sanders**

**Stillwater**

**Treasure**

**Wibaux**

**Ex Officio Members**

**Confederated Salish & Kootenai  
Tribes**

**Crow Tribe**

**Northern Cheyenne Tribe**

**Amtrak**

**BNSF Railway**

**Montana Department of  
Transportation**



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March 16, 2023

Federal Railroad Administration  
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE  
Washington, DC 20590

**Re: FRA Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study**

Dear FRA Long-Distance Study team,

The Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority (BSPRA) is pleased to offer the below comments in addition to the input we provided at the Long-Distance Study Northwest Working Group meeting in Denver on February 14, 2023.

Our comments focus on two areas: (1) key elements of renewed passenger rail service in the Greater Northwest Region and (2) key characteristics of restored/renewed North Coast Hiawatha/North Coast Limited service.

We look forward to collaborating with the Federal Railroad Administration on this exciting opportunity to expand and enhance America's long-distance national network of passenger rail. And BSPRA stands ready to help in any way we can to help make this vision a reality.

Best,



David Strohmaier  
Chairman

**Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority Comments**  
**FRA Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study**  
**March 16, 2023**

**PART I: Greater Northwest Passenger Rail—Key Elements**

**A. Long-Distance Routes**

1. **Priority Route:** North Coast Hiawatha/Limited—renewed & expanded as model long-distance route
  - a. Core endpoint destinations: Chicago to Seattle/Portland
  - b. Possible additional destination: Kansas City via St. Paul
2. **Key Connecting Route:** Empire Builder—enhanced
  - a. Core endpoint destinations: Chicago to Seattle/Portland
  - b. Route options to be coordinated with renewed North Coast Hiawatha/Limited
3. **Key Connecting Route:** Pioneer
  - a. Core endpoint destinations: Denver or Salt Lake City to Portland/possibly Seattle
  - b. Route options to be coordinated with renewed North Coast Hiawatha/Limited

**B. Institutional Management and Public Engagement Structure**

1. Amtrak (or other operator)
2. Host railroads
3. Tribes, states, and localities actively consulted through community engagement structure

**C. Core Service Characteristics**

1. Two times daily frequency in each direction
2. Achieves on-time performance reliability standards and true weather resilience
3. Progressively improved operating speeds—to be determined
4. Continuous ‘state of the art’ wi-fi connectivity
5. 21<sup>st</sup> century train sets to serve diverse needs of passengers and communities

**D. Coordinated Route Options for the Trio of Long-Distance Routes under Item A**

1. **Midwest:** Eau Claire, Madison, Rochester, others?
2. **Mountains:** Serving both Butte and Helena, MT, and Mineral and Lake Counties
3. **Northwest:** Northern route to Seattle, Yakima Valley route to Seattle, north side of Columbia River, south side of Columbia River.

**E. Future Western Long-Distance Routes Stimulated by Trio of Routes under Item A**

1. El Paso-Albuquerque-Denver-Billings-Calgary/Edmonton
2. Los Angeles-Las Vegas-Salt Lake City-Butte-Calgary (via British Columbia or Great Falls)
3. Service Connecting South Dakota to National Rail Network

**F. Stations**

1. Locations to be determined
2. Features: weather-proof, disability access
3. Local siting of new stations to maximize intermodal air, major highway, and transit connections.

**G. Connectivity Plans**

1. Transit coordination, rail spur lines, shuttle services, car/bike transport, 21<sup>st</sup> century options.
2. Coordinated scheduling with Empire Builder, Pioneer and prospective north-south routes.

**H. Future planning commitment:** Electrification and other emerging locomotive technologies.

## **PART II: Renewed North Coast Hiawatha/Limited—Key Characteristics**

**A. Route Name:** New geographically and culturally appropriate name to be determined.

**B. Highly Diverse Cities, Towns, Tribes and Communities Served**

1. Seven of the top 100 U.S. metropolitan areas: Chicago, Seattle, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Portland, Milwaukee, Madison, and Spokane
2. Twelve other metropolitan areas
3. Fifteen micropolitan areas
4. Hundreds of smaller towns nestled along or within catchment area of the route
5. More the twenty tribal nations and communities along or near the route—a distinctive characteristic of the NCH/L route.

**C. Connection Among Smaller and Larger Communities**

1. The route will encompass and develop more than 20 travel markets between smaller and larger communities—most of them less than 200 miles in radius.
2. 20+ travel markets linked with twice daily service in each direction will create large ridership with substantial fare recovery.
3. Route will serve multiple travel purposes.

**D. Connection to National Rail, Air, and Highway Transportation Network**

1. Route will, as it did for eighty years, connect national and global visitors to Yellowstone National Park and multiple other scenic wonders directly or in tandem with the Empire Builder: Theodore Roosevelt, Glacier, North Cascades, Mt. Rainier, and Olympic national parks, and Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area, plus more than 500 miles of Rocky Mountains scenery and more than 100 miles of the Cascades scenery.
2. Allow global and national visitors to reach tribal nations by rail.
3. Will serve as a unique catalyst for creating north-south rail connections: El Paso to Calgary, Los Angeles to Salt Lake City to Western Montana and Canada.
4. Will provide connectivity to international and regional air terminals, along with access to and emergency redundancy for Interstate Highway routing.

**E. Development of Rural & Tribal Communities**

1. Conservative estimates suggest a minimum of \$271 million of annual economic benefits accruing disproportionately to small towns. Rail reverses devastating impact of Interstate Highway System on rural and tribal communities and furthers transportation equity.
2. Renewing the vitality of rural and tribal communities will boost the social determinants of health and improve health outcomes in these areas.
3. Rural and tribal access to civic resources in larger cities—health, education, cultural resources, services—will increase significantly, especially in winter, yielding substantial socioeconomic benefits.

**F. Evidence of Community Engagement and Local Support**

1. Current movement to renew the NCH/L line in rural Montana with critical support from 17 rural counties out of 20 member counties of the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority. This movement is spreading to diverse communities across the Greater Northwest Region.
2. Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority is pioneering community engagement processes that can be transferred as a process of community input into the operation of the renewed NCH/L route on a long-term basis—serving as a model for the rest of the nation.