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Comments: Draft Amtrak Cascades Preliminary Service Development Plan

An outstanding vision - which should be expanded to benefit our entire state

All Aboard Washington (AAWA) congratulates WSDOT for its vision for the Cascades corridor, which is expansive and appropriate to the needs of this decade. Although we understand that the preliminary SDP applies only to the Cascades corridor, WSDOT and our legislature must follow through on our state's commitment to mitigate the effects of climate change and improve both economic development and statewide mobility by developing and implementing statewide passenger rail and enhanced freight rail services.

Priority 1: Implement Alternative E, 16 daily frequencies

To successfully implement this option, WSDOT must work with BNSF, Sound Transit, Amtrak, Oregon, British Columbia, and other appropriate stakeholders to ensure that reliability and on-time performance are improved. WSDOT must work with the legislature to ensure sufficient funding is provided so that Alternative E can be implemented as soon as equipment becomes available.

Priority 2: Travel time, speed, and competitiveness with driving

While travel time is important, we believe that travel time is less important than increased frequencies (Priority 1). It is our belief that people will use the train rather than drive because of the comfort, safety, convenience, and the advantage that train travel provides in terms of productive time, rather than non-productive time spent driving.

Express or "skip-stop" service is worthy of trials & ridership evaluation. However, we do not anticipate that such service will provide significantly increased ridership. Amtrak has tried non-stop or limited-stop Acela service between New York and Washington D. C. several times without success. Additionally, stations with limited ridership such as Stanwood are seeing significant growth after the pandemic as

people work from home and housing prices in the area are some of the most attractive in the Puget Sound region.

Priority 3: Multimodal connections throughout the state

WSDOT should take advantage of the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Corridor Identification Program (CID) grant to the Montana Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority (BSPRA) to evaluate the effect/impact of passenger rail ridership on the Amtrak Cascades as the result of potential restoration of the North Coast Hiawatha/Stampede Pass corridor. The FRA CID award to Montana, in conjunction with the FRA's Long Distance Service Study identification of North Coast Hiawatha (NCH) as a preferred route for restoration utilizing Stampede Pass, demonstrates federal interest in restoring NCH service. It is imperative that WSDOT consider restoration of NCH service in the scoping and planning of the full SDP for Amtrak Cascades. WSDOT should work with our legislature to provide matching funds for 2025 CID grants for the purpose of establishing state-sponsored service along the NCH corridor. WSDOT should also prepare for connections to the proposed Pioneer service, which will interconnect the Cascades corridor.

WSDOT should also consider infrastructure improvements such as double-tracking and an infill station at Blaine by taking advantage of federal funding opportunities available now as part of preparations for World Cup 2026.

Speed the planning and implementation process

AAWA is concerned that the proposed timeframe for service development is too lengthy. We must move beyond the "preliminary" SDP into the full SDP process as soon as possible. We must implement the WSDOT stated vision while Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding opportunities are available.. We encourage WSDOT to apply for all Federal discretionary grant programs available (CRISI, Fed-State, Grade Crossing Elimination, others). Avoid going back to the drawing board on projects that have already been planned.