

Welcome, [AAWA](#) and [AORTA](#) members! We are including news from both states in preparation for a joint newsletter in our next edition.



The Washington State Capitol in Olympia on November 21st, 2019.

Washington Legislature Responds to I-976

by Lloyd Flem

During mid-November meetings of the Washington State Senate and House Transportation Committees, Chairs Steve Hobbs and Jake Fey said it is essential to proceed as though I-976 would stand. Efforts to overturn it are seen as longshots. It appears the proponents of I-976 were careful to avoid including provisions that would likely cause the initiative to be thrown out.

Motor vehicle license fees were reduced to \$30.00 (plus mandated, non-reduced add-ons, making \$43.25 the effective minimum.) In addition, the abilities for the State and sub-state entities to impose many other fees were eliminated. Weight fees, designed in part to charge more for heavier vehicles with their added impacts on streets and roads, were eliminated. Fees on electric vehicles, imposed to compensate for the loss of gas tax, were greatly reduced. A few minor fees, such as those for "vanity" license plates, were retained.

All transportation programs will lose some funding. Highways, with the bulk of funding coming from the gas tax, will be least impacted. Decades ago, highway/auto/petroleum interests persuaded legislators nationwide to mandate that any and all motor vehicle fuel taxes had to be limited to highway (and in WA, car ferry) uses. This actually became the 18th Amendment to our State Constitution. (Highway lobbyists never were able to do this in Europe, and California has modified their equivalent legislation.) Losses to the Motor Vehicle Account, which is primarily for highways, were estimated to be only 6%.

More severely impacted will be the Multimodal Transportation Account, much of which funds transit and rail programs. WSDOT's CFO estimates a loss of 66% the first year with income down 85% over a ten-year period. Losses for the passenger rail program include both capital and operating funds for the Amtrak *Cascades*. Needless to say, no ideas of increasing passenger rail, or any other programs funded in part by I-976, were discussed.

Transit generally, and Sound Transit specifically, will be hit hard. I-976 cut the car tab rate used to repay ST bonds from 0.8% to 0.2%. Also, Kelley Blue Book must be used to determine the value of used vehicles. The Washington State Transit Association reported that 48 programs could be cut statewide. About 30% of funding for transit systems was stated as the average cut. Most severely hit was Garfield County in the southeast corner of the state. Over 90% of their transit funding would be cut, as discussed in this *Crosscut* article:

crosscut.com/2019/11/why-conservative-rural-county-joining-legal-battle-against-washingtons-i-976

Some street and sidewalk funds for cities, as well as bike, pedestrian, and "complete streets" programs, will be hindered. Even some highway maintenance will be impacted, unless road spending priorities change. In that regard, Governor Inslee issued an order (which could be overridden by the Legislature, but doubtful, as most members appear to agree) that capacity increases be put on hold for six months, with maintenance – the preservation and repair of existing roadways – emphasized for highway dollars.

Concern was raised in the Senate that the impact of implementing I-976 would be negative in terms of increased private vehicle use, fossil fuel use, and resultant increases in congestion, air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and public safety threats.

Questions that need resolution:

- Can communities who wish to fund transit still vote to tax themselves for such? It may still be possible, but would require a 2/3 majority, a very high bar to reach.
- While funds for the Multimodal Transportation Account were slashed, could a part of the remaining "car tab fee" be used for transit and rail?
- What sources of state funds are still available or can be found to offset the losses resulting from the passage of I-976?
- What local (county, city, etc.) sources of funds, such as that now potentially available to Kittitas County, can be found?

In addition, public-private partnerships are a possibility that should now be more thoroughly explored. This could be particularly helpful for intercity passenger rail, where fares cover a much larger percentage of operating costs than transit. And given the linear nature of rail, opportunities for co-utilization of rights-of-way are considerable.

Significant cuts in funding will begin as early as December 5th. The chairs of the STC and HTC asked for cooperation. It appeared most Legislators were amenable to working cooperatively on the major chores ahead.

We have to be open to alternatives to fund that which we as passenger rail advocates consider important. This I-976 funding crisis just might be our opportunity as rail advocates to help lead with some innovative ideas.

Re-Evaluating Our Priorities

With the passing of Initiative 976, it's clear that our voters are dissatisfied with "transportation as usual." Focusing the vast majority of spending on road infrastructure expansion is not sustainable. Washington has already made significant investments in better ways of moving people and goods. The voters are telling us to do things differently and make the most of these investments.

Cars and trucks are not going away. They serve places that cannot be served easily by other modes of transportation. But automotive infrastructure alone is inadequate, not to mention very expensive to build and maintain. WSDOT estimated that adding just one lane to I-5 in each direction from the Canadian border to the Columbia River (the benefits of which would be quickly lost to increased traffic) would cost \$110 billion, over twice the highest estimates of a brand new high-speed rail corridor between Vancouver, BC, Seattle, Portland, and Eugene.

The need for a more balanced transportation network is evident, yet our political and bureaucratic processes often view modes independently of one another. Several studies currently underway are evaluating different projects for different reasons, yet none of them are working together to plan optimal strategies that encourage intermodal collaboration. What if all these studies started considering how existing and planned improvements might complement one another? What if we evaluated each project based on its contribution to our mix of options for getting around? What if we began planning for how our sidewalks, bike lanes, roads, ferry terminals, train stations, and airports could all work together to get us anywhere we wanted?

Every improvement and addition competes against others for space, attention, and funding, but our political and bureaucratic processes favor road expansion. As we evaluate where to spend our limited transportation dollars, it is vital for us to start thinking differently about our priorities. We must ensure that we can plan our transportation system as a multimodal network that can move people and goods efficiently. We must change the antiquated funding mechanisms that favor roads, and instead evaluate projects according to merit and need. And we must make it known that maintenance deferral on our existing system is **not** acceptable.

AAWA believes investing in passenger rail is a key way for Washington to make better use of its existing infrastructure resources. Communities statewide would benefit from reinstated passenger rail service on existing tracks, bridges, tunnels, and former stations. This service could be started at a fraction of the cost of building brand new rights-of-way. But under the current transportation funding system, passenger rail projects are difficult to get off the ground. Therefore, AAWA calls on our elected leaders in Washington to re-evaluate **all** of our state's transportation spending — on highways, transit, ferries, air, and rail — with these central principles in mind:

1. Make the best use of the infrastructure and operational funding that we already have. Let's stop deferring maintenance, and let's make sure our transportation investment meets the needs of our growing economy.
2. Plan our transportation system as an integrated, multimodal, sustainable, and environmentally-responsive network that can move people and goods everywhere in the state, now and for decades to come. Let's stop looking at each mode individually, and let's start planning for the 21st century transportation **system** that we want.
3. Examine the provisions that limit certain types of public funding to specific transportation modes. Let's stop earmarking money for roads, and let's start giving Washingtonians new transportation choices and better access to opportunity.

The public needs its elected officials to make the hard choices necessary to turn our hard-earned, limited dollars into a functional transportation system that will help us maintain our economic growth without sacrificing our state's quality of life in the future. Initiative 976 is forcing us to change how we think about transportation planning and funding. We should put **all** options on the table, and make 2020 the year that we finally set our priorities straight.



Cascades Preclearance in Canada

by Stephen Fesler - originally published on November 22nd, 2019 on theurbanist.org

Amtrak is hoping to improve service from Vancouver, British Columbia for its Amtrak *Cascades* service. At a briefing Wednesday, Ron Pate of WSDOT told the state Senate Transportation Committee that Amtrak requested preclearance for its services departing from Pacific Central Station in Vancouver last month. The request was made to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). If successful in attaining preclearance at the station, *Cascades* could save 10 minutes or more when returning to the United States.

Anton Babadjanov, a rail advocate with AAWA, told The Urbanist that the time savings could be much greater than just 10 minutes. "Currently the Amtrak *Cascades* scheduled travel time is 4 hours from Seattle to Vancouver and 4 hours and 25 minutes from Vancouver to Seattle," he said. "The extra 25 minutes are the provision for the inspection process taking place in Blaine. While Pate's presentation stated that travel time will be reduced by 'at least 10 minutes', that is likely a very conservative estimate as ideally the travel time would be made consistent in both directions and thus be reduced by 25 minutes going south."

Preclearance would fold all of the inspection process into departure at Pacific Central. The practice is used at other ports of entry across Canada and in other nations closely allied with the United States. Vancouver International Airport offers preclearance for all flights into the U.S., which essentially makes them a domestic flight upon arrival. The same would be true for Amtrak *Cascades*. Accommodating full preclearance is mostly an effort in small procedural changes by CBP. Pacific Central Station was upgraded to handle the current customs procedures for the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. While there could be small funding requirements for implementation, WSDOT believes preclearance could begin by 2021 if approved by CBP.

This preclearance effort is made possible by a new bilateral agreement between Canada and the United States that came into force in August, known as the Agreement on Land, Rail, Marine, and Air Transport Preclearance. Ultimately, preclearance of custom procedures would be a net benefit for the region's intercity transit riders and make them even more attractive options to reach destinations across borders.



A full room of attendees at AORTA's October 26th meeting at the Cook Memorial Library in La Grande, OR.

Full House for La Grande Rail Meeting

by Jon Nuxoll

It was standing-room only for AORTA's October 26th "Amtrak to the Blues and Boise" meeting at La Grande's Cook Memorial Library. An estimated 150 people – mostly local residents – filled the Hospitality Room to show their support for passenger rail service to eastern Oregon and southern Idaho along the Union Pacific main line. Attendance exceeded expectations, especially pleasing as there was only limited coverage in local media prior to the meeting (but extensive coverage afterward). AORTA also received many messages from eastern Oregon and Idaho residents and officials who were unable to attend.

La Grande Mayor Steven Clements welcomed attendees and noted that this push seems to have far more behind it than previous efforts to restore service. Eastern Oregon and Boise were last served by Amtrak's *Pioneer*, which ran from 1977 to 1997. Included in the crowd were local government and tribal officials, past *Pioneer* employees, and several AORTA and AAWA board members, eager to promote what surely will be a long-term undertaking

All Aboard Washington's Luis Moscoso and Louis Musso's opening line about a western Washington Democrat and eastern Washington Republican working together drew the biggest laughs and applause of the day. Luis and Louis then proceeded to show how that collaboration is happening with their effort to restore passenger rail service to the Yakima Valley via Stampede Pass. Washington's east-west project began with a study examining support for rail—who would use it, where, when, etc.—and public events along the proposed route to educate the public about rail. Both emphasized the importance of constituents contacting their local lawmakers and making them aware of their support for rail. In Washington, that led to the passage of a bill last session to study the feasibility of restored service, and supporters there are continuing to promote rail while awaiting completion of the study by June 2020.

Jeff Broderick, Portland State University graduate student and past Amtrak employee, compared rural and urban ridership, pointing out that many towns along the *Empire Builder* route have higher per-capita use of passenger trains than the Northeast Corridor despite limited service levels. AORTA President Jon Nuxoll spoke on rail advocacy in general, especially how all forms of

transportation are subsidized. AORTA Director Mark Meyer presented a history of public transportation through La Grande – which as of 2019 is down to one daily Salt Lake City-Boise-Portland bus. Stephen Hunt from Boise’s Valley Regional Transit spoke on transit as a means of promoting both private development and additional options – or “freedom” – for getting around.

Oregon Department of Transportation Transit and Rail Division Director Hal Gard stressed the importance of contacting legislators if new service is to succeed. A supportive message from Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett, unable to attend, was read aloud. Idaho Department of Transportation Planning Services Manager Ken Kanownik also attended on behalf of the Idaho Transportation Commission. Many participants spoke in favor of extending service east of Boise, to Salt Lake City and beyond.

Attendees of the four-hour gathering were urged to keep moving forward by organizing locally, contacting their lawmakers, joining advocacy organizations (such as AORTA, the Rail Passengers Association, and AAWA), and attending further events, including AORTA’s annual membership meeting and an upcoming AAWA Pasco meeting. Several in the audience also noted the older makeup of meeting participants, reinforcing the need for advocates to attract younger members.

The meeting was covered extensively by the The Observer newspaper of La Grande and Elkhorn Media (eastern Oregon radio), as well as a later follow-up story on Boise State Public Radio.

Why Form a Local Chapter?

by Jon Nuxoll

Organizing at the grassroots level is key to pushing for more passenger rail service. A new Oregon Trail/Treasure Valley AORTA chapter can build on the momentum from La Grande.

What can a chapter do?

- Educate the public with letters to the editor and op-ed articles.
- Ask other groups, like senior citizens and students, to work with us for rail.
- Sponsor and organize “whistle-stop” educational events along the route.
- Ask candidates for office their positions on rail service.
- Ask county and city officials to endorse pro-rail resolutions.
- Promote letter-writing campaigns to legislators.
- Network with other rail advocates in the Northwest and beyond.
- Document reasons local people support the return of rail service.
- Keep regional advocates abreast of local events and changes.
- Gather petition signatures.
- Staff a booth at county fairs and other community events.

Under AORTA’s bylaws, it takes five members to form a local chapter. AORTA can provide a chapter with access to its database, to assist in contacting lawmakers as well as interested members of the public.

Interested? Email AORTA at: president@aortarail.org



Curbed: Greyhound Nixes Portland Station

In early September, Greyhound stopped using its 550 NW 6th Avenue station just south of Amtrak's Portland Union Station, listing the property for sale. Tickets and information are available at a new ticket office less than a block away on 5th Avenue. However, the actual boarding location for the buses is a curb at 7411 Northwest Station Way, about four blocks away from the new ticket office and about a block Northwest of Union Station.

The move by Greyhound is a blow not only to passenger convenience and comfort, but also to intermodality. The Greyhound Station at NW 6th Avenue is also the stop for MAX light-rail yellow and green line trains, and about a block away from TriMet bus stops. Buses operated by Greyhound subsidiary BOLT Bus use a new stop across the Willamette River from the current and former Greyhound stops, at 1060 NE 13th Avenue (in the Lloyd District).

The change in station facilities in Portland is part of nationwide trend where Greyhound has discontinued routes, reduced service on existing routes, and/or eliminated station facilities and staffed ticket offices. About the same time as the change in Portland, Greyhound announced the closure of its station in downtown Boise, Idaho, in favor of a truck stop just off Interstate 84.

The only remaining Greyhound service in and out of Portland that is an Amtrak Thruway route is the one daily bus between Portland and Salt Lake City, roughly following the trek of the former Amtrak *Pioneer*. State-sponsored Amtrak Thruway bus connections to locations such as Astoria and Eugene continue to arrive and depart from Amtrak's Portland Union Station, as do buses to and from Tillamook and Bend.

Amtrak Announces FY 2019 Ridership Figures

Amtrak recently announced ridership statistics for all its routes in fiscal year 2019. The *Cascades* handled 828,247 passengers, up 2.7% over FY2018. While an increase is logically encouraging, it should be noted that FY2018 included the Amtrak 501 incident at DuPont, Washington, which caused a downward spike in ridership, at least initially. Amtrak's report does not break down individual ridership within the states of Oregon or Washington.

The *Empire Builder* once again carried more passengers than any other Amtrak long-distance train, logging 433,372, an increase of 1.1 percent over the previous year. The "second place" train was the *Coast Starlight* handling 426,029 passengers, up 2 percent from 2018. Overall long-distance ridership was up 0.9 percent. Again, whether these patronage increases are worth celebrating requires some research. FY2019 was the year that a *Coast Starlight* was stranded for well over a day near Oakridge, Oregon due to heavy snowfall, which resulted in service cancelations of the route for many days thereafter. The *Empire Builder* also suffered numerous cancelations due to severe winter weather, especially in February 2019. Such interruptions must be weighed against the fact that service outages of similar duration tend to happen each year.

As a bit of perspective: *Empire Builder* ridership ten years ago – FY2009 – was 515,444, and the *Coast Starlight* that year logged 432,565 patrons. Changes in patronage can be varied. In the case of the *Empire Builder*, the train in 2009 was still operating with refurbished equipment (at the time, an *Empire Builder* exclusive), had better on-board amenities than are currently available, had more year-round capacity than in FY2019, served many more staffed stations, and had at least a modicum of attention from Amtrak's marketing department. Clearly, FY2009 shows that offering a superlative service translates into increased ridership.

AORTA Board Votes to Create New Website

At the October 5th AORTA meeting in Eugene, the AORTA board voted to authorize funds to create a new website, still linked to the original web address: aortarail.org. The old website was provided without cost, but had recently become dormant. It was judged to be irrecoverable by the web designers who were contracted on the issue. CHCS Internet Development of Seattle is responsible for the design of the new site.

To reduce the overall cost, the new AORTA site will be a reconfiguration of ebtrain.net, the website for the *Empire Builder*; various AORTA members have also pledged donations to make additional modifications to suit the organization. The new AORTA site will include most of the components of the *Empire Builder* site, and will eventually host new "pages" within to include similar information for the *Coast Starlight* and *Cascades* services. AORTA directors Marian Rhys and David Crout have been working tirelessly for several months to update the AORTA membership database to give the organization a more thorough understanding of who belongs to the group, and to provide better communication (and fundraising) by updating member contact information. The new website is expected to be functional by the end of the year. Until then, Charlie Hamilton (of CHCS) has created a usable temporary site, to which AORTA members can easily post information.

Also on October 5th, AORTA board members met with State Representative Nancy Nathanson of Eugene, Co-Chair of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. She outlined the challenges of introducing a bill in the Oregon legislature which would specifically fund passenger rail projects. Ms. Nathanson testified in Washington, D.C. November 13th at the "Amtrak Now and into the Future" hearing conducted by the U.S. House Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials. She summarized the varied challenges facing Amtrak trains in Oregon (mostly infrastructure on freight railroads), and the need for dedicated funding to address the situation. Others testifying at the hearing included Jim Mathews, President of the Rail Passengers Association, and Richard Anderson, President and CEO of Amtrak.

In Memoriam: Hal Cooper Jr.

by Lloyd Flem

I would like to honor a man whose efforts were important in bringing modern passenger trains to our Northwest Corridor. Hal B Cooper, Ph.D., combined a brilliant mind with a kind and gentle spirit toward those fortunate enough to be among his friends and acquaintances. Hal would share his sophisticated engineering ideas with patience and enthusiasm to any and all, including those of us whose understanding of such was... let's say, limited!

Dr. Cooper produced a number of forward-looking monographs, mostly dealing with rail. Examples included a proposed tunnel between Siberia and Alaska beneath the Bering Sea. Another is a rail line connecting Alaska and the Lower Forty-Eight, roughly paralleling the Alcan Highway. That idea has recently gained interest among some political and business leaders. Many of Hal's works, available in book form, are available in AAWA's archives in Lacey.

Dr. Cooper's greatest contribution to passenger trains in the Pacific Northwest was his helping to convince representatives of the Swedish/Swiss firm ABB to demonstrate their X2000 train in the Northwest, as they were doing at that time (early 90s) in the Northeast. AAWA (then WashARP) advocated to the WA Legislature and others, and the X2000 was invited to come to our part of the country to overwhelmingly positive reviews. Soon after, the Spanish firm Talgo brought a train to the Northwest Corridor, which was also well received. Both the X2000 and the Talgo featured tilt technology and had other characteristics seen as ideal for the Northwest Corridor railroad environment. The Talgo trains, less costly than the ABB equipment, were leased by WSDOT and have proven essential to the success of our Northwest passenger rail renaissance.

Would we have our Amtrak *Cascades* success story had Hal Cooper not, on his own dime and time, helped convince ABB to come west? No way of knowing for certain, but Dr. Cooper's friendly persuasion helped to get the trains running our way. Thank you, Hal!

Hal B. Cooper Jr., Ph.D., passed away in Coeur d'Alene, ID on October 25. He is survived by his wife Carol, and two sons, Eric and Courtney. Rest in Peace, Friend.

In Memoriam: Elizabeth "Elsye" Starr

by Loren Herrigstad

Redheaded Elizabeth "Elyse" Starr was a presence at AAWA events for decades, even if she was a little quiet. A founding volunteer at Olympia-Lacey's Centennial Station, Elyse remained passionate about passenger trains throughout her life. She grew up in California and graduated from UC Santa Barbara. She was among the first generation of computer coders, familiar with now archaic languages like FORTRAN, COBOL, and BASIC.

Spending much of her working life as a computer programmer and analyst with the Washington State Department of Revenue in Olympia, Elyse prudently added to her state retirement by amassing a small real estate investment empire. Her favorite house was directly across the tracks from Centennial station. Sitting comfortably at an upstairs bay window, she could watch each train go by, as well as train-time activity at the station. Elyse even offered Centennial's initial public Wi-Fi by making her private router (named MEWP) available with no password.

While tracing her ancestry back to the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620, she nonetheless had no close relatives. So she elected to divide her estate among ten different charities. All Aboard Washington is grateful to have been selected as one of those charities upon her passing at age 75 in 2018, and even more grateful for her quiet presence and participation over the years.

A Toast: Celebrating Lloyd Flem

Join us in celebrating Lloyd Flem's decades of service to AAWA! We will be meeting at the Washington State Capitol's Columbia Room on Saturday, December 14th between 11:30 AM and 2:30 PM. Tickets cost \$30 per person and will include lunch. Attire will be office dressy, in line with our location. Transportation to and from Centennial Station will be available for those who arrive by train. To complete your reservation and request transportation to and from Centennial Station, fill out our online form at: aawa.us/mm_membership/pages/membership_donate

Don't Forget to Renew Your AAWA Membership!

All Aboard Washington (AAWA) is a nonprofit organization that promotes a safe and robust passenger rail system in our state. With your support, we are confident that Washington State passenger rail will continue to advance.

Please renew today and help us make our goals a reality. You may renew online at <https://aawa.us/renew/> If you are not a member, we ask that you join at <https://aawa.us/join/>

You may also send a check, with the form below, to:

All Aboard Washington

PO Box 70381

Thank you for your continued support.

Seattle, WA 98127-0381

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☐ New ☐ Renewal ☐ Address Change

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