

CONNECTING THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST AND BEYOND: ENSURING MOBILITY FOR ALL

By Luis Saúl Moscoso

Transportation planners realized long ago that intra and intercity mobility can best be achieved by transit and passenger rail modalities. Climate change, highway pollution and congestion have made us aware of the need to “*transition to environmentally sustainable and socially just mobilities*.” Our personal mobility and the politics of movement underlie the growing understanding for equitable transportation systems in the 21st Century.

Within a few decades after Amtrak took over intercity passenger rail operations in Washington and Oregon, service was reduced to just the **Amtrak Cascades** along the **Pacific Northwest Corridor** from Vancouver, B.C. to Eugene, OR. The elimination of long distance service along the **North Coast Hiawatha** and **Pioneer** lines resulted in the loss of inter-city mobility for underserved communities of eastern Washington and Oregon, as well as all points east to Mountain and Midwestern states.

To address this loss in mobility, in the mid 1990s, the Washington State Legislature directed that a comprehensive assessment be made of the feasibility of developing a high-speed ground transportation (HSGT) system throughout the State of Washington. The establishment of the Amtrak Cascades service from Eugene, OR, through the metropolitan regions of Portland and Seattle, Vancouver, B.C. realized part of that dream, at least along the Pacific Northwest Corridor. Several studies done in 2001, 2017 and 2020, in Washington state demonstrated the feasibility of restoring intercity passenger rail on the corridor through central and eastern Washington once served by the *North Coast Hiawatha*. But lack of state funding in WA has kept this project on hold for over 20 years. The same was true in Oregon with the loss of the *Pioneer* line serving eastern OR.

But in 2022, the Federal Railroad Administration named the *North Coast Hiawatha* and *Pioneer* as 2 of 15 priority routes for potential restoration. Enter the **Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority** and their successful FRA grant to study what is now called the **Big Sky North Coast Corridor**.

The service plan for this restored route will reconnect communities across eight states, from Seattle and Portland to Chicago. The route, spanning approximately 2,300 miles, presents a unique opportunity to strengthen rural economies, support tourism, and provide a resilient, sustainable mode of interstate and intrastate travel. Efforts to restore passenger rail service to Eastern Oregon were explained in detail in Brian Yanity's two-part article, **THE CAMPAIGN TO RESTORE THE AMTRAK PIONEER**, in this year's Spring and Summer RUN Newsletters.

An incredible amount of local and regional media have been reporting news of **BSPRA** and **Pioneer** restoration efforts. **All Aboard Washington** (AAWA) in Washington state and the **Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates** (AORTA) in Oregon have led efforts to raise awareness with “Train Treks” and public meetings all across the Northwest. AAWA and AORTA have also partnered with the **Pacific Northwest Economic Region** to produce the **Pacific Northwest Rail Summits** these past 4 years, bringing together industry and rail user stakeholders in rotating annual conferences in Montana, Idaho, Washington and Oregon.

Rail Advocates we work with along the BSNCC and Pioneer routes have now established a low-tech **Rail Corridor Communications Network** (RCCN) overseen by **All Aboard Northwest** to share information and coordinate

advocacy efforts at the Federal and State levels. AAWA and AORTA are working closely with the bicameral and bipartisan **Legislative Rail Caucuses** in Oregon and Washington that we helped establish. We are looking forward to addressing numerous passenger and freight rail issues in the upcoming 2026 Legislative Sessions.

Other allies we partner with, like **Disability Rights Washington**, the **Rail Can't Wait Coalition** and the **Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians**, are helping create more momentum than ever around the need to address and expand mobility and equity in transportation modalities for both urban and rural communities. All of this must be done in conjunction with an understanding that climate change and the growing urbanization crises requires a new mobility paradigm. Passenger and freight rail stakeholders must collaborate with federal and state governments to create a mutually beneficial way of moving people and goods safely and cleanly in our country.

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