



Amtrak, make high-speed exit

By Charles D. Chieppo

August 7, 2000

With the start of its much-hyped high-speed rail service between Boston and New York now almost two years behind schedule, Amtrak this week announced that it would stick to proven technology for future high-speed lines. Let's hope the company is long gone before they can attempt any of those projects.

Never before used "tilt" technology has been blamed for the delays in the northeast corridor service. But Amtrak's attempt to introduce three-hour Boston-New York service serves as a perfect metaphor for the failure of America's 29-year-old experiment with putting inter-city rail service in the hands of a government-subsidized monopoly. Just ask Anthony Haswell, the "father of Amtrak" and founder of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, who said "I feel personally embarrassed over what I helped create."

With cumulative government subsidies nearing a staggering \$25 billion and market share at its lowest point in the company's history, Congress is finally showing signs of losing patience with Amtrak. Operating subsidies are slated to cease in two years, though the federal government will continue to subsidize capital costs such as new locomotives. Anticipating the end of operating subsidies, the railroad's capital budget has been rising steadily.

Reacting to this pressure to prop up a sagging bottom line, Amtrak announced plans to introduce "Acela Express," new service that would cut travel time between Boston and New York from four-and-a-half to three hours. The trains were originally slated to begin running in the fall of 1998, but were delayed by excessive wheel wear, computer software, and other developmental problems.

The new service was already more than a year late in December 1999, when Amtrak announced a delay in track electrification between New Haven, CT and Boston. Until recently, Boston-New York passengers faced a delay in New Haven, where the train switched from diesel to electric power.

A month later, Amtrak introduced "Acela Regional" service. These trains cut Boston-New York travel time to just under four hours, but do not have the tilt feature that is designed to keep them stable at speeds up to 150 miles per hour. The first Acela Regional train was 20 minutes late leaving Boston due to engine problems. Since that time, the service has been plagued by chronic delays, which Amtrak blames on problems with a voltage transfer in New Haven and the need for track repairs and bridge work.

February brought another delay in the introduction of express service when technicians discovered sideways movement in the wheels at high speeds.

But perhaps the most astonishing delay came in May, when Amtrak admitted that it

might not be able to deliver on its promise of three-hour Boston-New York service. A full year-and-a-half after Acela Express service was scheduled to begin, the railroad announced that tracks between New Haven and New York are too close together to allow for use of the tilt mechanism, limiting speeds for that stretch to 75-80 miles per hour.

It doesn't stop there. Testing was again halted on the new trains in June, when cracked or missing bolts were found in the trains' wheel sets. Delivery of the first express trains is now optimistically scheduled for September - almost two years late and that much closer to Amtrak's "self-sufficiency" deadline.

Amtrak blames these problems on the manufacturer of the new high-speed trains. But the record shows that this flabby, federally subsidized monopoly is incapable of delivering competitive service.

The company was formed in 1971, when the U.S. Department of Transportation took over the ownership and operation of private railroads. It was a difficult time in the railroad industry and the companies were losing money. But it didn't take long for it to become clear that Amtrak wasn't the answer. In its first full year of operation, Amtrak operated half as many trains, but still managed to lose twice as much money as the private railroads had during the previous year.

Recently the Amtrak Reform Council, a watchdog organization created by Congress, issued a report that questioned whether the railroad could achieve partial self-sufficiency by the 2003 deadline. The report noted that Amtrak may be using faulty accounting methods to determine its bottom line. The railroad's response? "Congress does not require us to use standard accounting rules."

The American government doesn't run an airline or a trucking company, and it shouldn't run a railroad either. In other modes of transportation, government provides the infrastructure - such as highways - but lets the private companies compete to deliver transportation services. Railroads should be no different. Let's end the failed experiment with Amtrak and let the private sector compete to deliver high-speed rail service.

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