

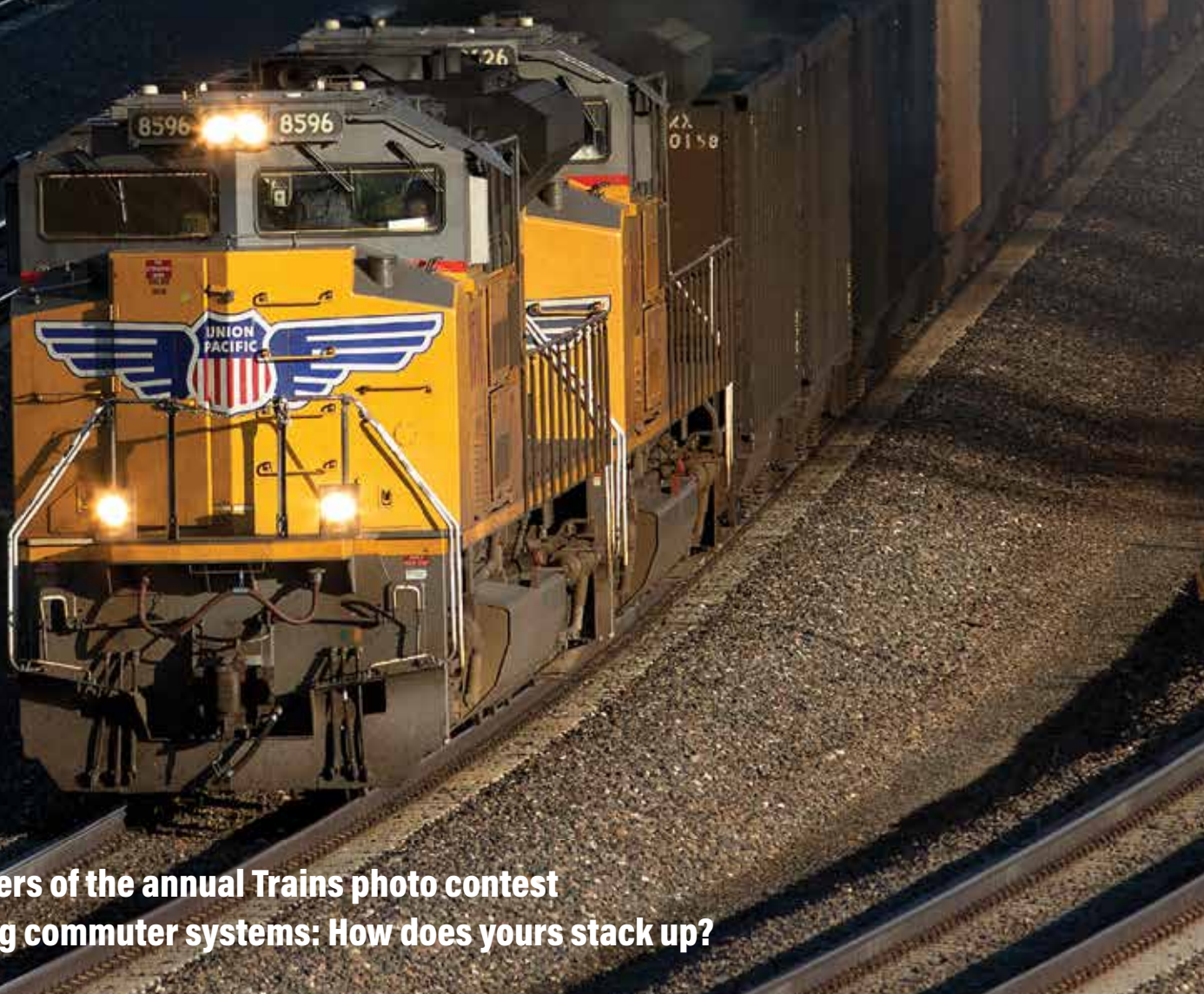
AMTRAK: MARDI GRAS SERVICE LAUNCHED

November 2025

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From the Editor



Carl Swanson

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The numbers are staggering. Union Pacific's proposed \$85 billion acquisition of Norfolk Southern would see UP grow to 50,000 route miles — a single railroad connecting 43 of the 50 states, serving 100 ports, and spanning the nation from ocean to ocean.

Reactions from industry professionals have been mixed, to say the least, notes Bill Stephens in his special report starting on page 16. For instance, Keith Creel, CEO of Canadian Pacific Kansas City, called the UP acquisition an "endgame scenario" for the railroad business.

Attention now turns to government regulators. If the deal wins approval (and UP and NS are confident it will), a new chapter in railroad history will be written.

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Subscription rate: single copy: \$7.99 (U.S.). Print + digital subscription rate: U.S.: 1 year \$58.95. Canadian: Add \$12.00 postage. Canadian price includes GST, payable in U.S. funds. All other international: Add \$22.00 postage, payable in U.S. funds, drawn on a U.S. bank. ©2025 Firecrown Media Inc., all rights reserved. Any publication, reproduction, or use without express permission in writing of any text, illustration, or photographic content in any manner is prohibited except for inclusion of brief quotations when credit is given. Title registered as trademark. *Trains* assumes no responsibility for the safe return of unsolicited photos, artwork, or manuscripts. Acceptable photos are paid for upon publication. Photos to be returned must include return postage. Feature articles are paid for upon publication. For information about submitting photos or articles, see Contributor Guidelines at www.Trains.com. Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved.

Trains (ISSN 0041-0934, USPS 529-850) is published monthly by Firecrown Media Inc., 405 Cherry Street, Chattanooga, TN 37402. Periodicals postage paid at Chattanooga, TN and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Trains*, PO Box 850, Lincolnshire, IL 60069.



Long-awaited Mardi Gras Service launches

Gulf Coast region celebrates return Amtrak service, lost after Hurricane Katrina

▲ The engineer of a CSX freight heads back to his train after a roll-by inspection of *Mardi Gras* train No. 23 near Bay St. Louis, Miss., on Aug. 19, 2025. Both the morning and evening passenger trains are scheduled to meet at this spot. Three photos, Bob Johnston

TWENTY YEARS AFTER Hurricane Katrina battered the Gulf Coast, and more than nine years after a New Orleans-Florida “inspection train” that held the promise of restored passenger service, two daily *Mardi Gras* Service round trips are now running between New Orleans and Mobile, Ala.

The start also comes three years after weeks of Surface Transportation Board hearings prompted by the adversarial approach of the railroads charged with operating and hosting the trains.

It shouldn't have taken this long. Hundreds of enthusiastic well-wishers turned out at each of four rural Mississippi stops to greet the inaugural special on Aug. 16; revenue service started the following Monday. The New Orleans brass-band sendoff and large gatherings at communities along the way were particularly satisfying to backers from the Southern Rail Commission. Its predecessor organizations initiated short-lived, daily *Gulf Coast Limited* round trips in the 1980s and 1990s before and during the

triweekly *Sunset Limited's* 1993-2005 interlude ended by Katrina.

The earlier Gulf Coast ventures failed to survive when one-off infusions of state funding expired and sufficient civic support never materialized in a region where congested Interstate 10 was the only option.

This time, a combination of federal and state funding orchestrated by the SRC and its advisors was coupled with legislative support from powerful proponents such as U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker, a Mississippi Republican whose belief in the economic development and mobility benefits of the service never wavered.

The senator had congratulatory words for civic leaders and residents from podiums set up at gatherings along the way, but he especially relished waving to constituents from the Dutch door of Viewliner Inspection car No. 10004. The importance of Wicker's interest and oversight cannot be minimized; it helped pave the way for federal infrastructure capacity grants totaling \$275 million, which

will provide lasting value to host railroads Norfolk Southern and CSX Transportation, as well as the Port of Mobile.

Prior to that investment and efforts by Mobile Mayor Sandy Stimpson to broker a deal on behalf of tourism interests, roadblocks erected by the railroads, port, Mobile City Council, and Alabama Republican Gov. Kay Ivey were responsible for years of delays. Following a Mobile Convention Center luncheon, Stimpson told *Trains*, “The Port is our heart, so you have to be an honest broker about finding a solution where we can all thrive. That happened over time, and I think from what we've seen today, it wound up in a good spot.”

The settlement Amtrak finally inked allowed construction of a pocket track and platform on city property in the parking lot of the former station, destroyed by Katrina. However, it bars additional *Mardi Gras* round trips or passenger service extending east or north of Mobile. Those former Louisville & Nashville tracks previously hosted L&N's *Pan*

American to Nashville and Cincinnati as well as Amtrak's *Gulf Breeze*, connecting with the *Crescent* at Birmingham, Ala., and the *Sunset Limited* to Florida.

Nevertheless, Mobile did agree to join Louisiana and Mississippi in providing operating support, and Amtrak also contributed startup money, determined to demonstrate that initiating a new corridor service is possible. Mississippi is using Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds for a portion of its operating match. This is similar to what the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority has harnessed to help support its Boston-Brunswick, Maine, *Downeasters*. But at the outset of *Mardi Gras Service*, the Southern Rail Commission does not have the funding for staff like that of NNEPRA to oversee day-to-day service promotion and operating supervision. Gaining that capability will be especially important in a region requiring constant reminders that trains leaving twice a day are an alternative to non-productive time behind the wheel.

The potential need for oversight surfaced in the first few days of revenue operations, when CSX dispatchers slotted freight trains at a scheduled passenger meeting point west of Bay Saint Louis, Miss. During the following two weeks, a *Trains* analysis of operations revealed that six trains suffered delays there. Overall, though, on-time performance was 90% and there were eight instances where *Mardi Gras* trains were early at every stop. Is there too much recovery time in the schedule Amtrak and CSX negotiated?



Gulfport, Miss., was among the stops, without Amtrak service since 2005, that turned out large crowds for the inaugural special preceding the start of *Mardi Gras Service*.

Another valid question: how will "success" be realistically measured? Given Amtrak's chronic equipment shortage exacerbated by the withdrawal of Horizon coaches earlier this year — rolling stock intended for *Mardi Gras* trains — short-term revenue potential is limited. New Orleans-Mobile trains are assigned two 60-seat Amfleet II coaches and an Amfleet I combination 17-seat business class-café car, whose food and beverage offerings include local products.

As predicted, the first month after the inaugural generated a smattering of week-end sellouts. Endpoint adult fares Friday through Monday top out at \$84 in coach and \$114 for business class, while mid-week fares range between \$15 and \$30 in coach and \$59 to \$75 in business. Handcuffed by the lack of equipment, trains to

and from the first two Saints football games at the Caesars Superdome, a stone's throw from New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal, were booked weeks in advance. And what about adding extra capacity to handle crowds attending the trains' namesake events in Mobile and New Orleans, leading up to and including Fat Tuesday on Feb. 17, 2026? Any additional coaches that can be spared would clearly boost revenue and utility, but add to the trains' allocated costs under Amtrak's accounting system.

The real challenge, however, is to capture everyday patronage that will accrue with positive customer word of mouth. The foundation is there: I-10 is often jammed with trucks and is located well north of the coastal Mississippi communities. The more direct U.S. Route 90 to New Orleans through the same scenic coastal marshes traversed by *Mardi Gras* trains has been closed indefinitely. And parking is expensive in New Orleans, as in any major U.S. city.

In the meantime, the time and effort it took to launch these two daily round trips illustrate obstacles other rail corridor proponents must expect. *Mardi Gras* persevered by harnessing superior political firepower in Washington, engaging local communities, and benefitting from a committed Southern Rail Commission which quarterbacked funding opportunities and state-level support.

The excruciating effort and financial incentives it took to launch the service may be difficult to duplicate elsewhere. But now all eyes will be on how Amtrak, its railroad hosts, states, and principle sponsor to attract riders in a region that hasn't had meaningful rail passenger service for more than half a century. — *Bob Johnston*



U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker waves to the crowd as the inaugural special leaves Pascagoula, Miss., on Aug. 16. Wicker backed legislation providing initial operating support for the new corridor.



A NextGen Acela approaches Princeton Junction, N.J., with Washington-bound train No. 2153 on Aug. 29, 2025, the second day of revenue service. The train experienced “mechanical issues,” according to Amtrak, and reached Washington 42 minutes late. Bob Johnston

NextGen Acelas debut

First five long-delayed Alstom trainsets make first revenue runs, with two round trips on most days

FIVE ALSTOM TRAINSETS, finally accepted by Amtrak following years of testing and modifications, entered revenue service between Washington and Boston on the Northeast Corridor just before Labor Day. More are primed to supplant their 25-year-old legacy brethren in the succeeding weeks.

Although the trains’ 160-mph top speed is touted as the fastest Amtrak has ever operated, the NextGens initially assumed existing Acela schedules for two round trips Sunday through Friday and one on Saturday. That development is linked to the fact that performance capabilities related to the trains’ ability to take curves at higher speeds could not be replicated after years of testing, modifications, and re-testing on the Northeast Corridor’s aging infrastructure.

Aboard a press run the day before revenue service began, Alstom U.S. operations vice president Noah Heulitt noted the trainsets were the first built to Federal Railroad Administration Tier 3 crash energy management standards. Those standards had not been finalized when construction began at the company’s Hornell, N.Y., facility after the \$2.3 billion contract was signed in 2016. “No one had done this before,” Heulitt told *Trains*, “so there was a significant amount of work to be done to ensure that we are meeting the spirit and the intention [of the regulations].”

Production on 28 trainsets continued even as corrective modifications were made. Other sources indicate that the alterations include changes to power-car sus-

pension dampers to prevent oscillation on trailing units, sealing water leaks, replacing the original windows to facilitate better cell phone reception, and various software fixes. Retrofitting already-manufactured trainsets has slowed acceptance.

Initial assignments placed two of the five trainsets at Boston and two in Washington, with the fifth stationed at New York’s Sunnyside Yard if one needed an en-route substitution. That didn’t happen during the first few days of operation, although several longer-than-scheduled dwells occurred at stations, attributed by Amtrak to undisclosed “mechanical issues.”

From a dependability standpoint, NextGen deployment can’t come soon enough. Only 16 of the original 20 legacy trainsets are operational; the others have been sidelined for parts. With breakdowns more

have become increasingly shopworn.

By comparison, NextGen interiors seem brighter and more spacious because drop-down overhead bins intruding on center aisle headroom have been replaced by open luggage racks and space under seats. Other enhancements are between-seat power outlets, sturdier tray tables, fold-out cupholders separate from the tables, and reading lights built into headrests. The new nine-car trainsets have shorter carbodies and power cars and offer 386 seats compared with 304 on the originals, though first class capacity is virtually unchanged. The cafe car is well-stocked with a variety of food and beverage items, but has been designed with only stand-up shelves — not the table seating popular with the laptop crowd.

Also noted on two journeys aboard the NextGens the first week: less end-of-car storage for bulky suitcases, and taller windows that let in more light. Seats seem comfortably firm, but wider side posts between windows leave some seat occupants without any outside view, especially if the person in front decides to pull down their shade. Ride quality seems somewhat smoother, perhaps because the new crash-

“NO ONE HAD DONE THIS BEFORE, SO THERE WAS A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF WORK TO BE DONE TO ENSURE WE ARE MEETING THE SPIRIT AND INTENTION [OF REGULATIONS].”

— NOAH HEULITT, ALSTOM U.S. OPERATIONS VICE PRESIDENT

prevalent, the number of scheduled daily Acela departures was reduced in early August, creating gaps for what has been hourly service. Inside, the models that introduced the brand in November 2000 after Amtrak completed Boston-New Haven electrification the previous year

worthiness standards permit lighter car-bodies. But there is little difference between the NextGens, legacy Acela, and a Northeast Regional Amfleet coach when any of them pass over rough Northeast Corridor interlockings that get pounded daily by the never-ending train parade. — Bob Johnston

BNSF, CSX to work together

Intermodal partnership
could provide merger-like
benefits without union

BNSF RAILWAY AND CSX in August announced an intermodal partnership that will offer seamless domestic coast-to-coast service, plus new international service linking BNSF's Kansas City terminal with CSX-served ports on the East Coast.

The move came a little more than three weeks after Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern unveiled plans to merge into the first U.S. transcontinental railroad. But a CSX spokesman said the railroads had been working on their agreement for months.

BNSF and CSX said they would introduce direct domestic intermodal service between Southern California and Charlotte, N.C., and Jacksonville, Fla. Service also will be launched between Phoenix and Atlanta. The seamless service, the railroads said, will aim to convert over-the-road freight to rail.

In addition, the railroads plan to offer new direct international intermodal services linking Kansas City with the ports of New York and New Jersey, and Norfolk, Va.

"This collaboration between BNSF and CSX demonstrates the power of partnership, delivering greater flexibility, efficiency, and value for our customers," says Jon Gabriel, BNSF group vice president of consumer products. "We are looking forward to these offerings providing immediate, streamlined service to the supply chain across key markets nationwide."

Drew Johnson, CSX's vice president of intermodal sales and marketing, said the



CSX SD40-3 rebuild No. 4026 leads a westbound BNSF unit train through Hinsdale, Ill., on Dec. 24, 2015. BNSF and CSX have announced plans for an intermodal collaboration. David Lassen

"I can understand why in the current context why people might make that leap. However, let me be clear — this should not be interpreted as a reaction to anything. This is simply two railroads working together as we work together all the time and is no different than our SMX announcement in July," he said, referring to the joint Southeast-Mexico service launched with Canadian Pacific Kansas City through their new interchange at Myrtlewood, Ala. "Interline agreements like this are common, and we've worked on this particular agreement for many months."

The Surface Transportation Board's tougher 2001 merger review rules note interline partnerships can produce merger-like efficiencies without the risk of integration-related service meltdowns like those that accompanied the UP-Southern Pacific merger and the NS-CSX carve-up of Conrail.

The rules also say that the board will

BNSF and CSX said the new intermodal service "will offer immediate value for customers by increasing flexibility and optionality, while delivering integrated service for freight moving across the U.S."

Intermodal analyst Larry Gross says the BNSF-CSX deal should show that railroads can solve the intermodal interchange problem without a merger. "The lanes into the Southeast are long-haul lanes that rightfully should be prime for intermodal. LA-Atlanta is 2,200 highway miles," he says.

"The KC to East Coast offering is interesting because the BNSF portion is relatively short haul," Gross says. "This has been a key reason why the watershed markets have remained an intermodal hinterland — because the length of haul for one of the players is too short to be interesting. Perhaps this marks a change in that kind of thinking?"

In a sign that Wall Street was banking on a BNSF-CSX merger deal, CSX's stock price dropped 5% immediately after the railroads announced the agreement. Three days later Berkshire Hathaway Chairman Warren Buffett said he would not bid on CSX or NS, the logical merger partners for the Berkshire-owned BNSF.

The interline agreement was no surprise, says Rick Paterson, an analyst at Loop Capital Markets. "The recently announced UP-NS merger proposal has obviously pushed BNSF and CSX into each others' arms and it's much easier to collaborate and trust each other when there's a common enemy," Paterson says. "This is completely rational and was expected." — *Bill Stephens*

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— JON GABRIEL, BNSF GROUP VICE PRESIDENT OF CONSUMER PRODUCTS

joint lanes will create faster and more reliable service. "Together, we're opening access to key markets and strengthening options for our mutual customers," he says.

CSX spokesman Austin Staton said the interline agreement with BNSF is unrelated to the UP-NS merger.

weigh whether "claimed merger benefits can be achieved through cooperative agreements among carriers short of a merger. Given the size of the transactions with which we may be faced, and the dangers involved should these transactions fail, we will scrutinize claimed merger benefits very closely."



SEPTA train No. 216 prepares to leave Marcus Hook, Pa., for Philadelphia as an Amtrak Northeast Regional passes on Sept. 11, 2016. Among the impacts of SEPTA service cuts could be a reduction of some Amtrak service in Pennsylvania. Michael S. Murray

SEPTA begins slashing transit operations

Philadelphia sees start of 20% reduction in service, but injunction blocks fare hike, trims to Regional Rail

PHILADELPHIA HAS BECOME the first major U.S. city to see massive cuts to transit service because of a post-pandemic financial crisis, but it may not be the last.

On Aug. 24, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority began enacting 20% cuts to bus and rail service, reducing frequencies on Metro rail lines, eliminating 32 bus routes and shortening or reducing frequencies on 104 others. The cuts reflected a \$213 million budget shortfall and a deadlock in the Pennsylvania legislature over how to resolve the issue.

But a 21.5% fare increase and reductions in Regional Rail service, set for Sept. 1-2, were placed on hold when a Philadelphia judge issued a temporary injunction. That came in response to a lawsuit claiming the transit agency was “making up” the crisis to get more money from the state. The suit argued SEPTA had some \$400 million in a stabilization fund it could use to cover its funding needs; SEPTA had previously said that money is used to pay the agency’s bills and is not a “rainy-day fund.”

The injunction was effective through a hearing scheduled for Sept. 4, after this issue’s deadline. It did not roll back the earlier cuts, but left in doubt additional reductions set for Jan. 1, 2026, including elimination of five Regional Rail lines and a 9 p.m. curfew on all rail service.

“At that point, we will be left with no other choice but to begin dismantling the SEPTA system,” SEPTA General Manager

Scott Sauer had said earlier. “Tens of thousands of people or more will be left with no viable public transportation options.”

Some 3,000 bus stops lost service as of the Aug. 24 cuts, which came the day before the School District of Philadelphia opened classes for 2025-26. Philadelphia Mayor Cherelle Parker said about 52,000 students use SEPTA to get to school, and the district said some schools saw a notable drop in first-day attendance.

But on Aug. 28, the city said it would use transit subsidy money in its budget to address the needs of students. It reached agreement with SEPTA to increase service as of Sept. 9 on two trolley lines and nine bus routes that had seen reductions. On Sept. 15, service was to be restored on eight bus routes that had been eliminated, and

crease funding, while the Republican-controlled Senate pushed for SEPTA reforms and more money for rural road and bridge projects. This year, the House passed legislation to provide money for both transit and roads by increasing transportation’s share of the state sales tax. The Senate passed a budget bill that included the same dollar figure for transit statewide, \$292 million, but would draw most of it from the Public Transportation Trust Fund, intended for capital projects, and draw an equal amount of money — \$419 million over two years — from that fund for road projects.

The deadlock was part of the reason that the legislature was already eight weeks past its July 1 deadline to approve a fiscal 2025-26 budget as the SEPTA cuts began. Shapiro said he was willing to accept the transfer of some operating funding from the trust fund as part of a broader, long-term package of transit funding, but would not support a deal redirecting transit funding to roads.

Among the impacts outside of Philadelphia could be a loss of some Amtrak service. U.S. Rep. Brendan Boyle (D-Philadelphia) told reporters Amtrak President Roger Harris had said the company might have to discontinue the Harrisburg-Philadelphia-New York *Keystone Service*, which

“WE WILL BE LEFT WITH NO OTHER CHOICE BUT TO BEGIN DISMANTLING THE SEPTA SYSTEM. TENS OF THOUSANDS ... WILL BE LEFT WITH NO VIABLE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS.”

— SEPTA GENERAL MANAGER SCOTT SAUER

part of a route that had been shortened was to be revived.

SEPTA’s funding crisis arrived after several years of legislative stalemate over transit funding. Previously, the Democrat-controlled house had backed measures by Gov. Josh Shapiro, also a Democrat, to in-

sees 13 weekday round trips, without \$71 million in SEPTA payments. SEPTA pays that money for Regional Rail operations on Amtrak-owned lines, but those routes would be eliminated in the planned January cuts, so SEPTA could apply the money to its deficit. — *David Lassen*

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'PERE' REVIEW Lake State Railway has painted newly acquired SD70M No. 6437 to honor the predecessor Pere Marquette Railway. The railroad's supervisor of yard operations, Travis Vongrey, developed the concept and design honoring the Pere Marquette; Chris Rund assisted in researching colors and the final design and layout of the scheme. The Pere Marquette operated from 1900 to 1947, when it was absorbed by the Chesapeake & Ohio. The railroad served six states (including ferry service to Wisconsin) and the province of Ontario; much of the 375-mile Lake State Railway uses former Pere Marquette trackage. Lake State Railway

NEWS BRIEFS

Northstar commuter service to end in January

NORTHSTAR commuter rail service between Minneapolis and Big Lake, Minn., will be replaced by bus service beginning Jan. 5, a victim of ridership that never recovered after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Twin Cities' **METRO TRANSIT** agency said the regular runs would end Jan. 2, with the last trains Jan. 3 or 4 to serve a Minnesota Vikings home game. Before the pandemic, the Northstar service averaged 2,600 passengers per day; in 2024, that had declined to 430, with each rider costing taxpayers about \$233. In 2023, the subsidy was \$116.60 per rider, compared to \$16.07 for commuter bus service.

President Donald Trump fired **SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD** member Robert Primus Aug. 27, a move that would break a 2-2 deadlock between Democratic and Republican board members. Primus, a Democrat and the only board member to vote against the CPKC merger, was first appointed by Trump in 2020. STB members serve fixed terms and by law can only be removed by the president for "inefficiency, ne-

glect of duty, or malfeasance in office." No one has suggested Primus violated those standards, but Trump has fired Democrats on at least five other independent boards. Primus said he would fight the move.

ALSTOM SC44 locomotives in **AMTRAK MIDWEST** service have a sensor problem that can cause locomotive failures, Amtrak said after an August incident that left passengers on a Chicago-Pontiac *Wolverine* stranded for more than five hours, without light, air conditioning, or functioning toilets. Amtrak refused to provide details on the problem, corrective measures, or a time-frame for repairs, but said the 33 locomotives will continue to operate while the sensors are replaced. The SC44s are used on 18 daily round trips serving five states.

The **U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION** announced it was taking over management of **WASHINGTON UNION STATION**, saying it would leverage the station's commercial space to reinvest in the building. The DOT

has owned the station since 1981, but it has mostly been overseen by lessors. **AMTRAK** assumed control in July 2024 following a court action, saying the building needed \$75 million in deferred maintenance.

The **FEDERAL RAILROAD ADMINISTRATION** disbanded its **RAILROAD SAFETY ADVISORY COMMITTEE**, which featured representatives from railroads, labor, and suppliers and made safety recommendations to the FRA. The move was taken to comply with an executive order signed by President Trump. A **DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION** spokesman said it and other committees were "long overdue for a refresh" and had been "overrun with individuals whose sole focus is their radical DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] and climate agenda." The **TRANSPORTATION TRADES DIVISION** of the AFL-CIO said it was alarmed by the termination of the committees and the lack of a timeline to re-form them, and that "it is crucial that all those effected by safety issues are represented on the RSAC."



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Trains MAGAZINE



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European trains can dazzle — or disappoint

Not every train across the pond is superior to Amtrak



Bill Stephens
bybillstephens@gmail.com
Analysis: Trains.com

Every time a friend or travel writer returns from Europe and sets foot on American soil, you'll hear the same refrain: "Oh, if only we had passenger trains like that." What they mean, of course, is that Amtrak cannot possibly compare. Not on frequency, not on speed, not on equipment, not on stations, not on overall quality. Well, yes, in the case of the French TGV, or Germany's Intercity Express, or Italy's Frecciarossa, or any Swiss train that ever turned a wheel.

And, simultaneously no, if you're talking about regional service in Belgium or Italy, to name just two examples. If you've experienced both sides of this coin, you know what I mean.

There is no question that high-speed trains in Europe leave Amtrak in the dust. That's partly because of restrictions related to the Northeast Corridor's catenary and curvature. And it's partly because Amtrak's speedsters are what you could call Frankentrains: European equipment modified to meet U.S. crashworthiness standards. The lighter European trains ride like they're rolling on glass. But Amtrak's first generation Acelas are more like a hulking old Cadillac with tail fins bouncing and lurching along a bumpy road.

The condition of the Northeast Corridor doesn't help. On trip last summer aboard a *Northeast Regional* train, there were times I felt like I was going to be thrown from my seat between New York and Baltimore, particularly approaching bridges both large and small. You never feel this in Europe. Ever.

Nowhere in North America is there anything like, say, the 372-mile TGV run from Basel, Switzerland, to Paris Gare-de-Lyon. At 199 mph, the catenary towers pass by like a picket fence,

with quaint French farms and villages as a backdrop.

The Siemens-built German ICeneo3 we rode from Frankfurt to Amsterdam last fall is an upgrade — and one, fortunately, that seems to share traits with the Alstom-built NextGen Acela. The windows are large, the glass doors between cars open automatically and provide an airy feeling, and the Bistro car offers a range of food and beverage options. So there's reason to hope on comfort and amenities as new trains arrive.

Standard 79-mph Amtrak service is a wonderful way to travel, of course. You can get work done, chat with seatmates, or simply admire the scenery. In most parts of the country, though, the service often is not frequent or fast enough to compete with driving or flying, as is often the case in Europe.

But don't sell Amtrak short.

My wife and I took the fine Eurostar train No. 9322 from Amsterdam to Brussels last fall. In the Belgian capital, we transferred to a regional train bound for the medieval gem of Bruges, Belgium. Oh, the disappointment! (The train, not Bruges.)

Yes, National Railway of Belgium intercity train No. 2831 was under catenary. And, yes, there was frequent service on a line undergoing capacity improvements that include sections of third main track. But the AM80 electric multiple unit looked more worn out than an Amtrak P42, with the added indignity of graffiti scrawled across the nose. Worse, the train was dirty and overcrowded.

On the return trip to Brussels, our clean bilevel train had luggage racks built for something the size of a lunchbox you toted to school. Whoever designed these racks should be condemned to use them. We had no choice but to put our carry-on bags on the floor at the seats across the table from us. Fortunately, the train was not packed.

We were most perplexed, though, with the Italian Circumvesuviana service from Naples to Pompeii, or Pompei Scavi-Villa dei Misteri according to the timetable. Here you have one of the world's great archeological marvels, and it's served by a meter-gauge train that's a wonder all its own — the wonder being how it's still running. The scruffy electric multiple unit trains we rode date to the disco era, lack air conditioning, and suffer from reliability issues.

Immediately upon departing Napoli Garibaldi Station, our train frequently stopped inexplicably for a minute or two. The further we got from Naples, the better it performed. But the ride did not inspire confidence.

In fact, it made us yearn for Amfleet equipment that by comparison feels downright modern. The lesson from our fall travels? Not all European passenger service lives up to its vaunted reputation. **I**



A disappointing Belgian National Railways AM80 electric multiple unit train arrives in Brussels on Oct. 14, 2024. Bill Stephens



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Day 2 • Phoenix - San Carlos, Mexico

Early morning departure. Head south through Tucson and Green Valley. See large saguaro cacti en route. Cross into Mexico at Nogales. Enjoy lunch in Santa Ana. Pass vast expanses of rangeland and occasional pecan tree orchards. Continue through the Sonora Desert to your hotel in San Carlos on the Sea of Cortez for a relaxing two-night stay. Enjoy dinner. **BLD**

Day 3 • Sea of Cortez Boat Cruise

Morning cruise on the Sea of Cortez. Look for sea turtles, pelicans, and dolphins. Return to San Carlos. Lunch is on your own. Then, in the late afternoon, drive to Tetakawi overlook for spectacular views of the Gulf of California. Dinner is on your own. **B**

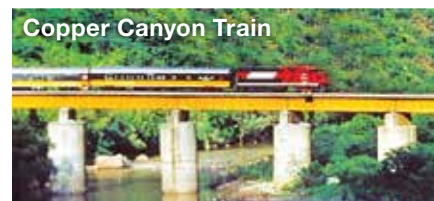
Day 4 • Pearl Farm, El Fuerte

Morning visit to Guaymas Pearl Farm, the only commercially operating pearl farm in the Americas. Then, continue south through culturally rich lands inhabited by the Yaqui and Mayo natives. See the giant Mayo Deer Dance statue. Lunch is on your own. Arrive in the picturesque colonial town of El Fuerte, founded in 1564. El Fuerte has been designated a "Pueblo Mágico" (Magic Town) by Mexico because of its beautifully preserved colonial architecture and romantic atmosphere. Enjoy dinner. **BD**

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Day 5 • El Fuerte, River Float Trip

Morning float trip on the El Fuerte River (river and weather conditions permitting). Look for parrots, kingfishers, cormorants, and Great Kiskadees. Next, a walking tour of historic El Fuerte. Visit the 18th century church and government palace. After an included lunch, enjoy a private Caravan show featuring the traditional Yaqui Deer Dance. Your afternoon is at leisure. Perhaps stroll the main plaza and shop for jewelry, pottery, and other handicrafts. Dinner is on your own. **BL**



Day 6 • Copper Canyon Train Ride

Today, experience the breathtaking magic of the Copper Canyon. Your privately chartered train car is reserved for Caravan's exclusive seating use. Your adventure begins with views of palm, banana, papaya, and mango trees as you pass through rolling hills and tropical farmlands. Lunch is on your own aboard the train. Tropical vistas give way to steep canyon walls as your train passes through a multitude of tunnels and bridges during the climb up the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range. For generations, the Tarahumara Indians have called the Copper Canyon and the Sierra Madre's 25,000 square miles their home. As your train passes through the station of Temoris, you can see the three ascending levels of train tracks overhead. Disembark in Barrancas. Enjoy a relaxing two-night stay at your spectacular hotel on the rim of the Copper Canyon. Your overnight elevation is approximately 7,300 feet. Enjoy dinner. **BD**

Day 7 • Copper Canyon Park

This morning, enjoy stunning views from your room overlooking the Copper Canyon. Then, visit Copper Canyon Adventure Park. Weather conditions and

maintenance issues permitting, you will take a short 10 minute aerial tram ride into the canyon. Return to your hotel. Enjoy lunch. Your afternoon is at leisure. Mingle with local Tarahumara artisan vendors. Dinner is on your own. **BL**

Day 8 • Chihuahua

After breakfast, drive north passing alongside Mexico's Mennonite communities. Lunch is on your own. Then, continue to your hotel in the modern and vibrant city of Chihuahua. Farewell dinner. **BD**

Day 9 • Chihuahua, El Paso, Texas

Morning sightseeing drive of Chihuahua. See the Government Palace and the historic center. Pass by an aqueduct, built in 1751. Next, drive north through the Chihuahuan Desert. Box lunch en route. Cross over the Rio Grande to the United States. Continue to your hotel in El Paso, Texas. Dinner is on your own. **BL**

Day 10 • El Paso

Your tour ends this morning at your hotel in El Paso. Breakfast included after 6:00 a.m. Transfer by hotel courtesy shuttle to El Paso International Airport (ELP) in El Paso, Texas. Thanks for vacationing with Caravan. ¡Muchas Gracias! **B**

BLD = Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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Running the 614

Ross Rowland and memories of steam

▲ Ross Rowland's former Chesapeake & Ohio J3a 4-8-4 No. 614 was built in June 1948 by the Lima Locomotive Works and became a steam-excursion mainstay. This undated photograph at the B&O Railroad Museum was likely taken in the early 1990s, during the locomotive's hiatus there after its participation in Rowland's American Coal Enterprises ACE 3000 trials.

Courtesy of the B&O Railroad Museum

ROSS ROWLAND'S recent and unexpected death unleashed the expected flood of memories, along with the usual chagrin that we had neglected to do a serious oral history with one of the most significant figures in the history of railway preservation. Few individuals in the field have so directly touched so many lives, created as much controversy, or made such indelible impressions on everyone he worked with.

It was my privilege almost 35 years ago to hold down the right-hand seat of his former Chesapeake & Ohio Greenbrier No. 614 for a full day's running. I've had my share of noteworthy experiences out on the railroad, but that particular day stands out as one of the most memorable — but not for the reasons you might expect.

It was everything a railroader could hope for — a magnificent locomotive, a fine crew, decent weather, elements of

danger and excitement, and the chance to see what No. 614 could do. The only things missing were distance (I had one mile of track), velocity (a self-imposed speed restriction of 4 mph), and a train. Spectacle and grand gestures usually define what "big steam railroading" is all about, and Ross was good at delivering them.

On that particular day, the objectives were a good deal more modest.

AN OPPORTUNITY UNFOLDS

At that time, I was curator of the B&O Railroad Museum in Baltimore. We had recently separated the museum from CSX, but were still very much part of the family as the new not-for-profit got on its feet. The heart of the museum was a major portion of the B&O's former Mount Clare Shop complex, including the iconic Passenger Car Roundhouse, Car Shop, and other buildings.

CSX also conveyed the railroad from the museum west to Mount Clare Junction, just shy of the 1829 Carrollton Viaduct. It comprised the B&O's first mile, the site of the First Stone (placed in 1828), and a good deal of railroad archeology. It was the beginning of the first modern railroad on the continent and some of the country's most historic real estate.

One of the earliest things I had done upon returning to the B&O Museum in 1989 was start a volunteer program, and train a cadre of heritage railroaders the same way the B&O had trained me. After a year or so, I had a small, but skilled, crew I would have been proud to send out on any railroad. That, and getting a World War II-era Electro-Motive SW1 running, meant the museum was again alive and able to demonstrate classic railroading.

In 1991, Ross Rowland had concluded No. 614 runs else-

where, and the locomotive needed a home for a while. Because it was in such fine shape, we had it hot for special event weekends over the next couple of years. For the first one we rigged up a large paper banner for No. 614 to burst through. Ross was at the throttle, and being the showman that he was, made it seem like he was making 60 per. It was really about 5 mph, but Ross knew how to create a spectacle. My heart was in my throat the whole time, hoping the Big Engine didn't find a flaw in the early-20th century rails. At least we had replaced enough ties to hold gauge.

GLORIOUS DAY ON THE RAILROAD

At this remove, I'm not certain which day in late 1992 we made the staff and volunteer runs. The trips represented the kind of opportunity that once in a while presents itself. On that weekend, Ross and his crew (with substantial help from museum staff, and especially, volunteers) had No. 614 ready to go a day or two early.

I saw the chance to share the special experiences we created for others with the people who actually made it happen. It was also an opportunity to explain things like cut-off, the importance of cylinder cocks, how injectors work, what a well-laid fire looks like, and so on. Watching a boiler blow-down demonstration is always exciting. The best way to learn about railroading is to do it.

During the short runs, there was nevertheless a gnawing element of terror. We had put in gauge bars between the rails where needed. Large diesel locomotives by then were coming and going from Mount Clare, so I had reasonable confidence in the track. But I recall wondering who I would call first if something gave way and No. 614 found the cinders. It would have been embarrassing, but not the first time the Terminal Trainmaster had summoned a yard engine, the Car Department, and the local track gang to help us out.

I don't remember how many round trips we made from the



On Easter Sunday, April 9, 1950, Chesapeake & Ohio 4-8-4 No. 614 roars over a creek feeding into Hampton Roads, Va., as it nears the end of an eastbound passenger run. H. Reid

museum grounds to the CSX connection. The cab easily accommodated four or five people, spending an hour or so enjoying American railroading's first mile of main line at the pace of a walk. "Uncle" Al Phillips was with us all day. It was a rare treat to spend time with one of the most insightful locomotive men I've ever known.

The initial challenges had been water and coal. By that time, No. 614 was low on both. In an old industrial city like Baltimore, you would think it straightforward to find both for a locomotive. And you would be wrong. The Mount Clare hydrant system had long since been shut down. Just 20 years before, there were still coal yards scattered around the city. By the 1990s, all were gone.

We started preparing for the weekend operation many days prior. We couldn't afford what the Baltimore City Fire Department (or a swimming pool-filling outfit) would charge to fill the tender. So we ran shop hoses from whatever spigots we could reach. I remember the skepticism bordering on derision as we dropped the tiny hoses through the tender hatch. It had the flavor of an old joke. "How many garden hoses does it take to water a 4-8-4?"

However, time was on our side. At three gallons a minute, you can fill a Greenbrier's tender at the rate of 180 gallons per hour, or about 4,000 gallons in a calendar day. Pretty soon, you have a respectable 10,000

or 12,000 gallons — enough for several long weekends of puttering around the yard.

The other daunting task was coaling it. The details are now hazy, but at some point, someone (might have been Ross, might have been the Operating Department) had caused a 50-foot Railgon full of Appalachia's Finest to appear at the museum. Our smallish loader/hoe was almost useless for the task, and renting a clamshell rig was out of the question.

Seventy tons of glistening bituminous lay piled in a high-sided gondola a few yards from the nearly empty tender of a magnificent J3a. For want of that fuel, No. 614 would remain just a cold, lifeless 434-ton steel Tantalus. We had to improvise.

Or more accurately, reach back to the earliest days of steam locomotion, when coal delivered in buckets fueled Peter Cooper's engine, and the ancient Grasshoppers, Coal Crabs, Mud-Diggers, Camels, and Ten-Wheelers that followed at Mount Clare. Over the course of a week or two, you can move a fair amount of coal by hand.

Fortunately, although No. 614 might get only three or four miles to the ton out on the main line with a train, it needed but a ton or so a day to simmer quietly and once in a while move around a bit. I tried to represent the task as part of the B&O Museum Fitness Plan, but nobody bought into it. They did, however, move the coal.

A NOT-SO-HIDDEN AGENDA

Making those few gentle runs from the museum's yard to Mt. Clare Junction may have seemed like a waste of time, coal, and water. They served no apparent purpose and didn't even begin to polish the rails. Thinking that way is rational — and demonstrates knowing the price of everything, and the value of nothing.

Ross (and Wes Camp, Al Phillips, and rest of the No. 614 crew) knew what I was up to. There was no way I, or the museum, or anyone else could adequately acknowledge the grit and creativity our tiny staff and the corps of volunteers had already shown, and would continue to contribute. Their hard work had made it possible for No. 614 to return to Mount Clare for a few years, and on occasion even bestow a gentle rain of cinders and whiff of coal smoke upon audiences unaware of how rare was the opportunity and how fleeting the moment.

Putting some of the museum's crew in the cab of a mighty locomotive for even an hour was at least a start. In modest ways, they were sampling the magic Ross, and the many folks working with him over the previous decades, had created for millions of people.

I wish also that I had made the opportunity to say something like that to Ross Rowland directly. He knew what he had accomplished. Those of us in Train World collectively had some vague inkling, but never bothered to string together the remarkable — sometimes outlandish — projects he either made happen or convinced us should happen.

Rowland would occasionally throw his weight around, and had detractors as well as admirers. That is often the case for bold individuals with outsized personalities. Still, we took for granted that he would somehow always be around to blaze another trail, tell another story, or create another remarkable event. Until, of course, it was too late. But it will never be too late to say this out loud: Thanks, Ross. It was a hell of a good run. — *John P. Hankey*

WEEK



RAIL BLOCKBUSTER

SPECIAL REPORT

Union Pacific, Norfolk Southern seek
transcontinental unification

by Bill Stephens

UP SD9043MAC No. 3663 and NS SD70ACU
No. 7248 lead a westbound grain train down-
grade on UP at Hermosa, Wyo., on June 18,
2018. Alastair Poll



An NS train with UP power meets NS' RoadRailer auto-parts train in Attica, Ind., in April 2023. Auto-industry traffic is a strength of both railroads. John E. Troxler

Canadian Pacific Kansas City CEO Keith Creel says Union Pacific's proposed \$85 billion acquisition of Norfolk Southern is a nationwide service disaster waiting to happen and an "endgame scenario" for the rail industry. Retired NS CEO David Goode — who snatched 58% of Conrail away from CSX in 1997 and made the NS map what it is today — says the UP-NS combo is the logical outcome of nearly two centuries of rail history. "The story of railroading has always been the story of mergers and expansion," he says.

And to UP CEO Jim Vena and current NS CEO Mark George, their blockbuster deal is a gamechanger — the spark required to ignite growth in an industry that has seen precious little since traffic peaked in 2006.

They say the combination of the 32,880-mile UP and 19,335-mile NS will attract freight by eliminating problematic interchanges, speeding and simplifying service, and tapping the so-called watershed markets along the Mississippi River where rail is not competitive today.

The CEOs also say the merger will boost

the U.S. economy, support a revival of domestic manufacturing, make American companies more competitive in global markets, and preserve and create jobs for unionized railroaders.

Shippers and rail labor — stung by previous megamergers — are wary. The National Industrial Transportation League said shippers would not support a transcontinental railroad deal unless it improves service, pricing, and competition. SMART-TD, the largest rail union, said it would oppose the merger and skewered UP's strategies, operations, and labor relations practices.

Wall Street, meanwhile, did a quick about-face. As recently as June analysts were skeptical that a merger of two of the giant Class I railroads would pass regulatory muster at the Surface Transportation Board, whose 2001 merger rules have discouraged consolidation. But when Vena speaks, Wall Street listens. He says that if the STB reviews the deal while asking if a transcontinental railroad is better for customers and the country, they will approve it. "We're very confident of that, or we wouldn't have taken the step," Vena says.

Analysts expect the STB to approve the UP-NS merger. They also widely expected BNSF Railway would seek to acquire CSX as a competitive response. But Berkshire Hath-

away Chairman Warren Buffett told CSX CEO Joe Hinrichs on Aug. 3 that it would not bid on CSX or NS. Rather, BNSF would forge closer ties with CSX.

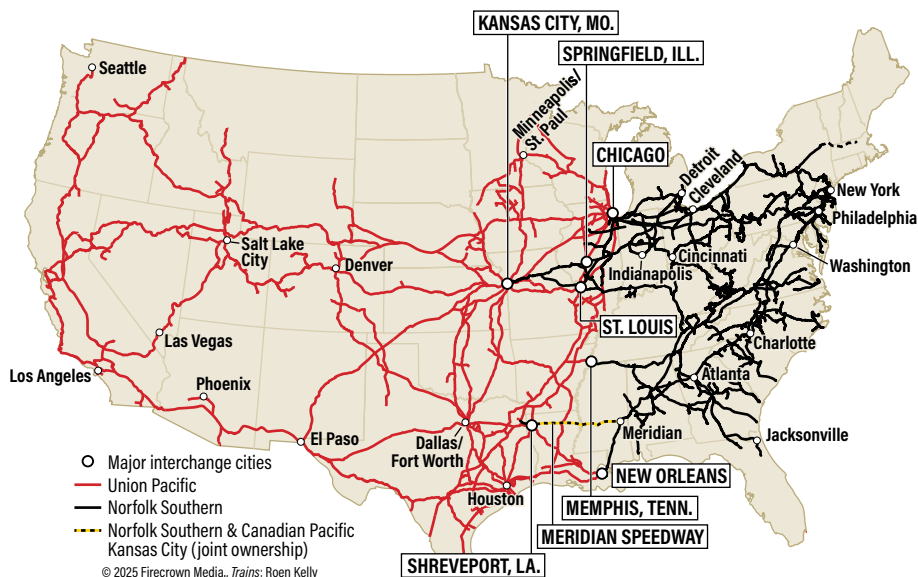
The fate of the UP-NS combo sits with the STB and its untested rules, which require a Class I combination to enhance rail competition and be in the public interest. The railroads insist the merger will be able to clear those hurdles and usher in a new era of growth. They're banking on the big railroad creating \$4 billion in synergies, including \$3 billion in revenue from new traffic and \$1 billion in cost and productivity savings.

STRONGER TOGETHER

UP and NS would bring different strengths to a combined 52,215-mile system.

UP boasts the industry's largest carload network, anchored by its crown jewel: dominant access to Gulf Coast petrochemical plants and their lucrative chemical traffic.

NS operates the largest intermodal network in the East — including superior access to the distribution center network in



Springfield, Ill., is not currently a major interchange point between Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern, but it could gain importance in a combined system of more than 52,000 miles.

eastern Pennsylvania, which supplies retailers and their big-box stores from the New York metro area to Washington.

A UP-NS merger would also put together strong automotive networks. NS originates more finished vehicle traffic than any other railroad. UP is the No. 1 auto carrier in the West and reaches all major gateways with Mexico. With single-line service, they could avoid interchanges that currently rely on the Indiana Harbor Belt and Belt Railway of Chicago, as well as the Alton & Southern in St. Louis. The combined system also could link parts suppliers and assembly plants in the Midwest and Southeast with those in Texas and Mexico.

Some intermodal and carload growth could come from the watershed, which involves origins and destinations within a few hundred miles of the Mississippi River, the de facto dividing line between the Eastern and Western railroads. For two railroads, splitting a 750-mile move isn't desirable. But watershed moves would be attractive for a transcontinental system.

AN END-TO-END MERGER

Today Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern exchange roughly a million carloads per year, or 6% of their combined volume. As each other's largest interchange partners, they swap traffic at six gateways where their networks touch: Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis, Memphis, Shreveport, La., and New Orleans.

As a single network, these gateways become seamless through routes rather than friction points. Transit times will drop by up to 48 hours for carload business, while the merged system will be able to eliminate costly and inefficient crosstown

rubber-tire moves for intermodal traffic in Chicago and Memphis.

A transcontinental system will create opportunities for more efficient routes by eliminating the length-of-haul and revenue-sharing decisions that currently come into play when two railroads are involved. And that means that the merger, if approved, would funnel switching work and some through traffic out of Chicago.

But Vena says it's unlikely that there will be massive swings of volume away from the Railroad Capital, a chronic chokepoint where 25% of North American rail traffic originates, terminates, or passes through. "I don't see a wholesale change that we're going to move everything out of Chicago and go straight to Kansas City," says Vena, who will lead the combined railroad. Rather, he says the merger will smooth Chicago operations by simply turning it into just another crew change point.

Details of how UP and NS operations will mesh won't be available until they file their merger application, perhaps as early as October. But current and former railroad executives say that Norfolk Southern's former Wabash — underutilized routes linking Kansas City and St. Louis with Detroit — could emerge as a winner.

For decades NS has touted Kansas City as an alternative to the Chicago gateway but has nothing to show for it. There was no reason for UP or BNSF to short-haul themselves by turning traffic over at Kansas City rather than Chicago. But now this Wabash incursion into Western railroad territory should gain importance as part of a combined UP-NS system.

First, a pair of UP Z-symbol stack trains that link Southern California with Chicago

could be rerouted off expensive BNSF trackage rights between K.C. and the Windy City by using the Wabash to Springfield, Ill., the junction with UP's former Gulf, Mobile & Ohio route to Chicago.

Second, intermodal, automotive, and merchandise traffic that flows to and from UP-served Mexican gateways and points in Texas could use the Wabash from St. Louis to reach points in the Ohio Valley and Northeast via a Fort Wayne, Ind., junction with the former Nickel Plate, or Butler, Ind., junction with the former Water Level Route. The same applies to traffic moving over UP's Golden State Route between Kansas City and the Southwest and California.

Third, chemical traffic UP originates on the Gulf Coast bound for points in the Midwest and Northeast could use UP's former Missouri Pacific route to Sidney, Ill., where it meets the former Wabash.

Single-line service also could boost the Meridian Speedway, which links the Southeast with the Southwest, Texas, and Mexico via Shreveport, La.

INTERMODAL GROWTH — AND COMPLICATIONS

When UP and NS interchange intermodal trains today in Chicago, Memphis, and Shreveport, one crew steps off and another climbs aboard the run-through power. The merger won't change that. New single-line service, however, would allow the combined railroad to block traffic for smaller destinations as well as open up service to areas that for UP would be a short-haul move, such as from NS locations to the Twin Cities via Chicago interchange.

Above all, single-line service should lead to growth. Intermodal analyst Larry Gross, in a July analysis, said that a pair of transcontinental mergers could lead to as



A joint NS-UP inspection train looks at the Chicago-Kansas City route via Hannibal, Mo., and Springfield, Ill., as a possible intermodal route in April 2014. NS has long sought more use of its Kansas City connection. Bruce Bird

much as 25% gain in domestic intermodal volume. But he also contends that better interline service — which is what BNSF and CSX aim to provide — could be as effective as a merger. “Substantial intermodal growth potential is hiding in plain sight. This is growth that wouldn’t require a wholesale overhaul of intermodal strategy, operations, or technology,” Gross says. “It would just require railroads to work better together, one way or the other.”

The merger would put three of the top four domestic intermodal providers in an awkward spot: J.B. Hunt, Schneider, and STG Logistics would have their tents pitched in the wrong camp in the East.

J.B. Hunt, the largest domestic truckload intermodal operator, uses BNSF in the West and relies primarily on NS in the East. Containers for No. 3 operator Schneider and No. 4 STG Logistics ride Union Pacific trains in the West and CSX’s in the East.

If these arrangements stuck, the companies would be unable to tap the benefits of coast-to-coast single-line service. Their rival, No. 2 Hub Group, sits in the sweet spot, already using both UP and NS. Hub backs the merger, with CEO Phillip Yeager saying the merger should “lead to a large opportunity for intermodal conversion due to improved reliability and service quality as well as improved freight economics.”

Gross is among the industry observers who believe that J.B. Hunt, Schneider, and STG will swap rail partners in the East. “But these things are not easy,” he says. “We’re talking major dislocation here.”

AT A GLANCE: UNION PACIFIC + NORFOLK SOUTHERN

2024	Union Pacific	Norfolk Southern	Combined
Route Miles	32,880	19,335	52,215
Annual Revenue	\$24.25 billion	\$12.12 billion	\$36.37 billion
Operating Income	\$9.7 billion	\$4.0 billion	\$13.7 billion
Operating Ratio	60%	66.40%	62.1%
Market Capitalization	\$133.6 billion	\$63 billion	\$196.6 billion
Annual Volume	8.28 million loads	7.05 million loads	15.33 million
Intermodal Volume	3.83 million	4.10 million	7.93 million
Carload Volume	3.81 million	2.26 million	6.07 million
Coal Volume	633,517	684,800	1.32 million
Employees	32,439	19,584	52,023
Locomotives	6,106	3,195	9,301

Source: Investor presentations and STB Form R-1 for 2024

Another domestic intermodal wrinkle: The UP-CSX UMAX joint container pool is unlikely to survive. Intermodal marketing companies that don’t own their own boxes rely on UMAX and the UP-NS EMP pool.

Rick LaGore, CEO of InTek Intermodal Logistics, says container fleets would expand if merger-related growth materializes. And he says intermodal marketing companies likely will want to keep their competitive options open despite the single-line benefits a UP-NS combination would offer.

“There will be handoffs within the UP-NS network that shippers and IMCs will want to maintain. In some markets, walking away from certain switches would make intermodal less competitive due to additional drayage,” LaGore says.

TOO BIG TO FAIL?

Creel, speaking on CPKC’s earnings call, warned about the potential for a nationwide rail service meltdown if UP

and NS were to bungle the integration.

Creel knows the complexities firsthand: CPKC’s problematic May 3 computer cutover in former Kansas City Southern territory in the U.S. caused nearly three months of congestion, missed switches, and delays for customers in Louisiana, east Texas, and Mississippi.

The impact of similar issues on a combined UP-NS system would be enormous. “A network that big, if it gets sick, it’s not isolated to a particular geographic region of the nation,” Creel says. “The entire nation’s going to get sick.”

Vena and George say they’re aware of the complexities of tying big railroads together and promise to avoid the problems that initially bedeviled prior megamergers. “I don’t want to be judged by what happened 30 years ago,” Vena says. “I want to be judged on what capability we have at Union Pacific now.”

Last year UP had a smooth cutover to its new cloud-based NetControl computer system, which handles everything from rail car inventory and scheduling to waybill processing and train, locomotive, and terminal management. “It was a non-event,” Vena says. “It was like nobody knew it actually happened.”

THE REGULATORY QUESTION

The \$85 billion question is whether the STB will approve the merger. The forecasts of Wall Street analysts vary widely, with odds ranging from 25% (Bloomberg) to 75% (Wolfe Research). The reality is that no one really knows.

Wall Street is predisposed to deals, and analyst discussions with their clients — institutional investors, pension funds, hedge funds, and traders seeking a quick profit off mergers — produce an echo chamber that amplifies a pro-merger message, independent rail analyst Anthony B. Hatch says.

Changes in Washington also have played a role in the rail merger debate. With the Trump administration rolling back federal regulations, and Republican Patrick Fuchs leading the STB, some believe the conditions may be right for a final



J.B. Hunt partners with Norfolk Southern in the East, BNSF in the west. Retaining that arrangement would keep it from gaining the benefits of single-railroad service. Bruce Stahl

round of consolidation. “You have to assume that Vena knows what he’s doing,” Hatch says. “On the other hand, I do not believe he has any inside information from the board or even from the White House.”

For years, analysts were skeptical any Class I megamerger could get past go. That began to change in May, after Vena told *Trains* a merger would be good for the country, rail shippers, and the industry — and said he always thought a transcon merger could win approval.

Vena has outsized influence with investors: On the day the former CN executive was named UP’s chief operating officer in January 2019, UP’s stock skyrocketed, making the company’s market capitalization jump by nearly \$9 billion. Analysts were confident that Vena, a protégé of E. Hunter Harrison, could successfully implement his low-cost Precision Scheduled Railroading operating model at UP.

Rick Paterson, an analyst with Loop Capital Markets, noted the quick change in sentiment. “Five minutes ago mergers were impossible and now UP and NS are presenting it as a fait accompli,” he says. “It’s probably a combination of Vena’s credibility as a Hunter-related PSR guy that generates low operating ratios, plus the fact that he has a willing audience. Investors have only made money in this industry through pricing power and PSR improving margins, never volume growth.”

Many analysts seem convinced that UP and NS can demonstrate that their merger will boost rail competition and is in the public interest because it promises to take



UP run-through stack train ZLCAI (Long Beach, Calif.-Atlanta) rolls past eastbound KCS trains and yard power at Pearl, Miss., on the Meridian Speedway on April 10, 2022. Doug Koontz

trucks off the road. “Clarity on growth prospects and competitiveness enabled by a transcon rail supports the political case for a merger,” TD Cowen analyst Jason Seidl wrote in a note to clients.

The 180-degree turn on merger views doesn’t just apply to Wall Street. Railroads themselves have typically said the concessions required to win regulatory approval — notably some form of competitive access for carload and bulk shippers — would destroy any value that a transcontinental merger might create.

But Vena says the real competitor is the highway — not other railroads — and that UP will give shippers more options by building a bigger, better network. Roughly half the railroad’s traffic is truck-competitive intermodal business, he notes, while much of UP’s rail-dependent traffic, like soybeans, competes in global markets. “If we price it wrong, we lose the business,” he says.

A wild card is that the STB has broad latitude to impose conditions on any merger. Plus, trackside communities, shippers, labor, ports, other freight railroads, and Amtrak and commuter agencies all will line up seeking some sort of concessions.

Vena and George say they will be able to win over skeptical shippers and unions. “As people start to come to understand what we’re putting forward, they’re going to see the benefits,” George says. The railroads will guarantee union jobs, he adds. And customers should support a merger that creates more reliable service, slashes transit times, and will enable shippers to reduce the size of their car fleets, Vena says.

The key question, CPKC’s Creel says, is whether having two go-everywhere systems in the U.S. is in the public interest. “Rest assured, the STB will want to get this one right,” he says.

Getting it right will involve heavy lifting: Weighing the pros and cons of UP-NS as well as further consolidation.

And that ensures the STB’s review won’t just be about the UP acquisition of NS.

It will, Creel says, be about the future of the North American rail network. “This does not just affect UP and NS. UP and NS both know this, the regulator knows this, we all know this,” Creel says. “This ... might likely trigger additional industry consolidation — an endgame scenario.”

Goode looks at the industry, its large multinational customers, and the need for more single-line service and says the timing is right for a transcontinental deal — something that he could never pull off while he was leading NS. In one way, Goode expects that UP-NS will mirror the Conrail split. “It far exceeded our dreams,” he says.

And dreams are what the rail industry has been built on, Goode says, going all the way back to William Mahone’s Atlantic, Mississippi & Ohio, a 19th century Norfolk & Western predecessor. “There’s no shortage of forward thinking, and I think that’s true today,” Goode says. “These guys are thinking about the future, and they’re thinking about making things better, and that’s what you want out of business.” **I**



An eastbound ethanol train with a cab-control equipped UP unit and run-through NS power passes farmers discussing work plans west of Elburn, Ill., on May 1, 2015. Don Kalkman



GRADING THE COMMUTER RAILROADS: HOW DOES YOURS STACK UP?

By John Friedmann

Outbound from Chicago, Metra train No. 921 backs around the Rock Island District connection in Joliet, Ill., on a foggy Feb. 4, 2008. Metra ranks high in reliability. Nick Suydam





Most commuters hate their railroad. They'll brag about their city's sports teams, symphony, or scenery. But commuters will compete to tell horror stories about how bad it is to commute by rail, insisting that their carrier, route, or station is the absolute worst.

And the past five years of pandemic and aftermath have been painful: no transportation sector has suffered more than commuter rail. White collar rail commuters can work from home, while blue-collar workers are often back on the bus and subway.

Which commuter railroads do a good job and which deserve the criticism aimed their way? We used data from the Federal Transit Administration's National Transit Database to construct five measures — efficiency, utilization, growth, relevance, and reliability — then combined the measures to produce a grade for each of the 29 commuter carriers reviewed.

Carriers were divided into large, medium, small, and micro. (See the "Making the grade" sidebar for a detailed explanation.)

[LARGE]

A LONG ISLAND RAIL ROAD, NEW YORK CITY

Long Island is the country's busiest commuter carrier, and its tremendous passenger density (more than 50% higher than runner-up Metro-North) helped it rank first in the big-boy category. While boring to railfans, the carrier's homogenous fleet also helped its efficiency score. The carrier's worst area? Train breakdowns, substantially worse than category leader Metro-North. Long Island carried almost 80% of its pre-pandemic ridership in 2023, helped by the debut of LIRR's Grand Central spur. But LIRR is lucky that capital efficiency isn't a criterion — that Grand Central project cost \$11 billion, \$7 billion over budget!

A METRO-NORTH, NEW YORK CITY

Metro-North finished only a percentage point behind its Long Island cousin, showing that New York's commuter railroads have done the best job of staying relevant in the country's largest metro area. The carrier returned almost 72% of its 2018 ridership, impressive because Metro-North didn't have a new service like Long Island's Grand Central expansion and turned in category-best breakdown numbers. Costs per passenger-mile are the highest among the big carriers, driven in part by its sprawling operation and overlapping express and local service demanded by its Manhattan clientele.

B MBTA, BOSTON

Boston was bolstered by high ridership relative to the area's population and a high score for cost effectiveness. The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority outsources rail operations to Keolis, which may help lower costs, but Keolis has drawn



Connecticut Department of Transportation dual-mode General Electric P32AC-DM No. 229 is on the rear of a southbound Metro-North Hudson Line push-pull train at Breakneck Ridge, N.Y., on July 18, 2018. The carrier ranked second among large systems in our survey. Scott A. Hartley

criticism for high breakdown levels. Boston's reliance on diesel power and an aging coach fleet may also be to blame. It's not the weather, though — Metra makes it through Chicago winters with a third of MBTA's mechanical failures. Boston's billion-dollar 2025 restoration of commuter rail to New Bedford and Fall River will add riders but at a high cost.

C NJ TRANSIT, NEW JERSEY

Reliability problems have made NJ Transit a political punching bag. While NJ Transit consistently ranks worst in mechanical breakdowns among the big carriers (headline: "New Jersey Transit is ruining my life"), Northeast Corridor landlord Amtrak deserves some of the blame. Some relief is on the way. Big (the Gateway Program to add capacity and resilience into New York City) and small (almost \$20 million to replace opaque railcar windows). NJT operates the largest route system of any commuter carrier but sparse patronage in South Jersey service drags down the railroad's density numbers.

C METRA, CHICAGO

Chicago's sprawling commuter carrier has a density problem: ridership fell by more than half from 2018 to 2023, and Metra operates 75% more route miles than Metro-North for just two-thirds of the riders. All of Metra's routes are focused on Chicago's core, so without a downtown resurgence the carrier has to reinvent itself. New O'Hare-centric services are years

away. Metra had an enviable reputation for reliability but the car fleet is aging; hopefully Alstom multilevels on order will help restore the carrier's good name. A merger with the CTA, Chicago's subway and bus operator, is proposed to help tame costs, which are second only to Metro-North among big commuter carriers.

C SEPTA COMMUTER RAIL, PHILADELPHIA

SEPTA has done a lot to change its commuter rail network since taking over in 1983: connecting the former Pennsylvania and Reading Railroad commuter networks with a downtown tunnel, trimming the weakest branches, and opening an airport line. But SEPTA's rail network is still deeply troubled, overlapping separate subway and trolley networks, all serving a city that's been losing population since 1950. Low ridership density almost pushed SEPTA to a "D," and causes a lot of short trains. While EMUs help keep costs down, 2023 ridership was less than 60% of 2018. Management has won awards for making the system cleaner and safer, but perpetual funding crises — the latest triggering big service cuts as this issue reached deadline — and the lack of growth catalysts make it hard to rise in the rankings.

[MEDIUM]

A FRONTRUNNER, SALT LAKE CITY

Sixteen-year-old FrontRunner is a relative youngster, but wins top marks



An NJ Transit train to Long Branch crosses the Raritan River Swing Bridge in South Amboy, N.J., on March 21, 2020. Russell Sullivan

among the medium-size systems. FrontRunner leads all systems in cost efficiency (operating expense per passenger-mile), which shows in how the system has done business — service to the low-ridership northern terminus of Pleasant View is indefinitely suspended, and FrontRunner makes do with portions of single track despite operating more than 50 trains per day. Running a linear system in a valley home to more than 80% of the state's population also helps drive the density needed for success. FrontRunner is building additional capacity, while planned route expansions may make the system's cost efficiency ranking tougher to sustain.

A RTD COMMUTER RAIL, DENVER *

Denver gets an "A," with an asterisk: two of Denver's four commuter rail lines opened between 2018 and 2023, artificially inflating Denver's ridership growth. But grow Denver did, and now Denver's commuter rail service is the best-utilized and most relevant (ridership as a percentage of local population) of the medium-sized systems. Why? Reasonably priced (\$10) service to Denver's distant but huge airport is a big driver, as is frequent electrified service to a vibrant downtown. Denver's first

commuter rail route opened in 2016, so the region has the luxury of providing service to where people are today, not a century ago. But capital cost overruns mean that some promised routes aren't funded and are unlikely to be built for more than a decade, if ever.

B CALTRAIN, SAN FRANCISCO

Caltrain's commuter service dates from 1863 but remains relevant. The single route down the San Francisco Peninsula to San Jose (and extended farther to Gilroy in 1992) is well utilized in a region with many transit alternatives. Caltrain also scored as the most mechanically reliable system among the medium-sized systems. Commuter rail prospered as Silicon Valley and tech employment grew along its route, and passenger counts doubled in the early 2000s, then cratered: down more than 60% since the pandemic. Electrification and new equipment in 2024 lured new riders, but Caltrain needs a San Francisco downtown recovery.

C TRI-RAIL, SOUTH FLORIDA

Tri-Rail looked like a failure when it began in 1989 as an alternative to under-construction Interstate 95, using a second-

choice route far from coastal downtowns. Then the West Palm Beach–Miami system became more useful with a 1998 extension directly to Miami's airport (and a fancy new airport station in 2015). Miami and Fort Lauderdale airport passengers helped Tri-Rail post the best 2023 ridership retention numbers of any system that didn't expand in the previous five years. Data shows Tri-Rail's single route isn't very useful to most commuters, but 2024 expansion via Florida East Coast to downtown Miami was an important step in the right direction. A future expansion on the coastal FEC route could be transformational.

F MARC, BALTIMORE – WASHINGTON, D.C.

Maryland Area Rail Commuter service expanded significantly starting in the 1990s, extending routes, adding frequencies and service on parallel routes, and buying new equipment to accommodate growing ridership. But it all came crashing down with the pandemic: ridership was still down 64% in 2023 and MARC posted category-worst cost efficiency. Throw in the poorest mechanical reliability record among the mid-sized systems, and it's tough to find a silver lining. A proposed link-up of MARC and Virginia's VRE could open up new markets but would require radical surgery on both carriers.

F METROLINK, LOS ANGELES

Metrolink is huge but generally irrelevant to commuters in sprawling Los Angeles: only microscopic systems in Portland, Nashville, and Minneapolis handle fewer trips per area resident. Of course, losing 74% of ridership from 2018 to 2023 didn't help as Angelenos found other ways to commute (or not) post-pandemic. The system's 545 route miles lead to passenger density numbers less than one-fifth of Denver and efficiency metrics that are lowest among the mid-size systems. Metrolink has excellent connectivity to Amtrak and other commuter rail systems, but has only one connection to LA's subway and light rail systems — at Union Passenger Terminal downtown. Metrolink has added service and adopted memory-schedules to capture new riders. The system also enjoys strong political support: a \$10 billion capital program aims to help the system.

[SMALL]

A SONOMA-MARIN RAIL TRANSIT, NORTHERN CALIFORNIA *

SMART's commuter rail north of San Francisco topped the small commuter railroad category, an "A" with an asterisk. SMART is one of the few railroads carrying more passengers than 2018, but that's because SMART opened new stations in 2019.



With the snow-covered San Bernardino Mountains rising in the distance, this westbound Metrolink train is right on time as it pulls into the Upland, Calif., station on Dec. 30, 2020. The system is huge and enjoys strong political support, but rates poorly in our survey. John Parrish

SMART keeps operating costs low with a simple system: 45 miles, 13 stations, served by nine married-pair DMU sets. SMART's ridership is surprisingly high considering the area's population density and dependence on a ferry connection to San Francisco, so the system's doing the best it can within its limitations.

A RAIL RUNNER EXPRESS, ALBUQUERQUE

Albuquerque doesn't really need a commuter rail system, but it has Rail Runner. The system even shut down for an entire year during the pandemic, after which local leaders wisely pivoted the system toward all-day mobility. Almost 70% of riders returned by 2023 despite the shutdown, and relatively high share of trips per resident likely means the system appeals to visitors trying to avoid the congested streets of Santa Fe.

B VIRGINIA RAILWAY EXPRESS (VRE), NORTHERN VIRGINIA

VRE is fighting some of the same battles as MARC: a system geared to Washington, D.C. commuters, many of whom are government employees. Indeed, both carriers have lost about two-thirds of their ridership from 2018 to 2023. But the smaller VRE has easier comps than MARC. VRE's high grade is driven by the best reliability score, perhaps benefitting from one type each of locomotive and cars. VRE recently agreed to purchase its Manassas Line from Norfolk Southern, but service expansion depends on the regional economy's health.

B SOUTH SHORE LINE, NORTHERN INDIANA

The "Last Interurban" does good and bad at the same time: it's the most cost-efficient but least relevant (fewest trips compared to area population) carrier of its size. Electrification likely helps operating costs but South Shore's relevance has been hurt by the hollowing out of Northern Indiana cities like Gary and now a less-robust Chicago. South Shore is aiming to open a new branch to Munster, Ind., in late 2025, which could add badly needed riders to a system with plenty of capacity.

B SUNRAIL, ORLANDO *

SunRail's "B" has an asterisk, since it expanded during the 2018-2023 measurement time: its grade was boosted significantly because 2023 ridership actually exceeded 2018 by 20%. SunRail still suffers from not serving many employment centers (including the theme parks) and its two-car trains mean that costs per passenger mile are higher than most of its peers. While SunRail expanded northward in 2024, the biggest opportunity lies in a connection to Orlando's massive airport, in

HOW WERE THE GRADES CALCULATED?

COMMUTER RAILROADS WERE DIVIDED INTO FOUR CATEGORIES:

LARGE: More than 20 million annual riders

MEDIUM: 3-10 million annual riders

SMALL: Fewer than 2 million annual riders

MICRO: Operating less than 20 trains/weekday

EACH CARRIER WAS SCORED ON FIVE FACTORS:

EFFICIENCY: Are system costs well controlled? Measured by operating cost per passenger mile.

UTILIZATION: Did commuters use the route network? Measured by passenger-miles per route mile.

GROWTH: Is the system growing or shrinking? Based on 2023 trips versus 2018. (Because of the pandemic, most carriers lost riders.)

RELEVANCE: Is the system an important part of the local transportation system? Measured by trips per area resident.

RELIABILITY: Can commuters count on the system? On-time train data was inconsistent, so the best proxy was mechanical failures per train mile.

Traditional measures like farebox-recovery ratio were not used: this comparison focused on outputs (what the system produced), not funding mechanisms or inputs. For fairness, grades were done on a curve within each group of like-sized carriers. All data is from the 2023 Federal Transit database, the latest available. — *John Friedmann*



A westbound South Shore train is seen having just left the Gary Metro Center in Gary, Ind., on its weekend run to Chicago on March 7, 2021. Bruce Stahl



On the afternoon of June 3, 2020, Virginia Railway Express MP36PH3C No. V60 heads up an eight-car Fredericksburg Line commuter train southbound on the CSX RF&P Subdivision. Train No. P305 has just departed from its stop at Brooke, Va. Jeffrey M. Morfit

cooperation with a Brightline extension toward Tampa.

B **SOUNDER, SEATTLE**

The Sounder system scores best on cost efficiency, in part because its low-density system uses rights over BNSF main lines instead of owning most of its track. But the system scored near the bottom in mechanical reliability, a situation highlighted in early 2025 when skipped inspections by Amtrak (which maintains Sounder equipment) forced the temporary cancellation of most Sounder trains.

C **EBART, SAN FRANCISCO ***

Pittsburgh (Pa.) hasn't had commuter trains since 1989, but Pittsburgh (Calif.) has eBart, a commuter rail line that extends the otherwise-incompatible BART rapid-transit system 9 miles using Stadler DMUs. The Contra Costa County system opened in 2018 (its grade is asterisked because the opening date skews passenger growth numbers), and scores in the top of its class for utilization due to its short route. Although passengers have to change trains, BART chose DMU technology because the capital costs (about \$50 million/mile) were less than half of extending the connecting BART transit line.

C **TRINITY RAILWAY EXPRESS, DALLAS-FORT WORTH**

TRE is the oldest and best-scoring of four Texas commuter lines, connecting the downtowns of Dallas and Fort Worth since 1996. Although only in the middle of the pack nationwide, TRE is the most efficient of the Lone Star systems, likely because it has more passenger density (and thus uses conventional locomotive-hauled consists

instead of DMUs). Unfortunately, TRE doesn't directly serve the DFW airport or Arlington's baseball and football stadiums.

D **DENTON COUNTY A-TRAIN, DALLAS-FORT WORTH**

The A-Train is a 21-mile low-density commuter line connecting the Dallas suburbs of Denton and Carrollton. It scores the worst among its peers for cost efficiency, operating Stadler DMU's on half-hour headways throughout the day for fewer than 750 riders/day in 2023. The line, built on former MKT right-of-way, connects with Dallas' light rail system in Carrollton, but the lack of integrated schedules makes the service harder to use.

D **CAPMETRO RAIL, AUSTIN**

CapMetro's single commuter rail line is envisioned as the starter segment for an extensive commuter and light rail system for the Texas capital: construction on a \$7 billion network is supposed to start in 2027. Meanwhile the existing line barely generates a passing grade: a high-cost

operation that carries modest loads and whose Stadler DMUs seem to be less reliable than other equipment. The University of Texas could be a big ridership generator, but the line (on a former Southern Pacific right-of-way), barely skirts the campus.

D **COASTER AND SPRINTER, SAN DIEGO**

San Diego's commuter trains squeak by with the lowest possible passing score (thank the grading curve!) The transit district has two rail operations: the Coaster conventional commuter service covering the south end of the former Santa Fe Surf Line, and the Sprinter diesel multiple-unit service on the 22-mile Escondido Branch. While the operations connect with each other, Amtrak, LA's Metrolink and with San Diego's light rail, operating costs are high and the coastal-oriented services miss much of the local population. The Coaster also faces an existential threat: the gradual collapse of the Del Mar bluffs along the route will necessitate a very expensive tunnel or route change.

F **SHORE LINE EAST, NEW HAVEN, CONN.**

Newer equipment. Fast running up to 90 mph. Beautiful coastal scenery while riders avoid Interstate 95. So why is SLE a failure? 2023's average ridership of fewer than 40 riders per train (each train has more than 400 seats) is the biggest indicator: cost per passenger-mile is among the nation's highest, and route utilization is the lowest. Shore Line East provides up to 20 trains per day east of New Haven along Amtrak's Northeast Corridor, but the population density is relatively low, New Haven has declined, and New York City can be more than 3½ hours away. But so far, local politicians have been successful in keeping the service alive.

I **TEXRAIL, DALLAS-FORT WORTH**

As the only carrier not running in 2018, TEXRail's grade is "incomplete." The 27-mile, nine-station route connects DFW airport with downtown Fort Worth via former Cotton Belt trackage, and these



With F40PHC-3 power unit No. 3106 in push mode, an Altamont Corridor Express train crosses Altamont Pass Road near Livermore, Calif., en route to Stockton on March 2, 2015. Alex Mayes



A North County Transit District Coaster commuter train, led by Siemens Charger SC44 No. 5001, departs from the Carlsbad Village station on May 7, 2025. The Coaster earns a passing grade but its operating costs are high and its route misses much of the local population. David Lassen

anchors help push ridership higher than the similar Austin or A-Train systems. A new connecting Silver Line will extend east from DFW to Plano, potentially adding riders to TEXRail. Uniquely, TEXRail shares part of its route with the Grapevine Vintage Railway, meaning Stadler DMU's and ancient EMD FL9s (and occasionally steam) intermingle.

[MICRO]

The size of these mini-systems (fewer than 20 trains/day) skews the data, so grading is pass-fail.

PASS ALTAMONT CORRIDOR EXPRESS, SAN JOSE

ACE is by far the best performing niche carrier, focusing its four daily round trips on carrying long-distance commuters from California's Central Valley to jobs in the pricey San Jose area. Even though 2023 ridership was a third of 2018, ACE still carried more than 200 passengers per

train and posted efficiency numbers comparable to larger systems. Expansion of the system is underway south of Stockton, initially to Merced.

FAIL WESTSIDE EXPRESS SERVICE (WES), PORTLAND, ORE.

Portland's Westside Express Service is the country's least efficient commuter operation, more than twice as expensive to operate per passenger-mile than the next-worst service. Ridership is low on the 15-mile route through Portland's suburbs: its 18 daily trains carried an average of only 26 riders in 2023, 72% fewer than 2018. The line uses unique DMUs manufactured by Colorado Railcar (now defunct), but when mechanical maintenance is needed, WES brings out the last Budd RDCs in United States commuter service.

FAIL WEGO STAR, NASHVILLE

The Star (formerly the Music City Star) deserves to succeed just for being thrifty: the line had the lowest construction costs per mile at startup, and has kept capi-

tal costs low by buying two generations of used Chicago gallery cars. Unfortunately, the seven-station, 32-mile line is the least utilized commuter rail operation in the country: fewer than 100,000 people rode the Star's 12 daily trains in 2023. The line was envisioned as a starter for a regional commuter rail network (mostly on CSX lines) but neither the local populace or CSX has shown much enthusiasm.

FAIL NORTHSTAR, MINNEAPOLIS

Originally envisioned as an alternative to I-94 running from Minneapolis to beyond St. Cloud, Northstar's low ridership projections forced the route to be halved and proposed service reduced by a third. Today, Northstar operates four weekday round trips, and handled just 12% of its 2018 ridership in 2023, the biggest decline of any system. Politicians argued buses could provide better and cheaper service, and operator MetroTransit agreed to end service. Northstar is on death row and will likely run its last miles during the first week of January 2026. **I**

An aerial photograph of a blue and yellow Seminole short line train crossing a wooden trestle bridge over a wide river. The train consists of two locomotives and several freight cars. The river is surrounded by lush green mangroves. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The title 'Short line' is in large blue letters, and 'in the Sunshine State' is in white letters below it.

Short line in the Sunshine State

**Smaller railroads drive
growth in Florida**

by Chase Gunnoe

Short line railroads work closely with Class I railroads to provide important first- and final-mile service in towns large and small. They drive economic growth in rural towns and large cities. In Florida, now the nation's fourth-largest economy at more than \$1.3 trillion in annual gross domestic product, short lines operate almost as many miles as their Class I railroad partners.

Florida's economy trails only California, Texas, and New York, and its population grew 14% to 21.5 million between 2010

success



and 2020 while adding more than 9 million homes. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands more people call Florida home. At one point, it was believed as many as 1,000 people per day were moving to the state.

For the rail industry, this means short lines play a more important role than ever. Today, 13 shortline railroads operate 1,120 miles in the Sunshine State, compared to CSX's 1,208 miles and Norfolk Southern's 148 miles. If you include the miles of regional railroads Florida East Coast, at 386 miles, and Genesee & Wyoming's Alabama & Gulf Coast Railway, at 51 miles, short lines and regionals total 1,557 miles compared to Class I railroads' 1,356 miles.

This has been the trend for 45 years, since deregulation launched by the Staggers

Act enabled entrepreneurial short lines to acquire and grow former Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Air Line properties deemed redundant by CSX. But few might have expected how much growth would rest on these smaller railroads serving regions where the state is expanding most.

Hundreds of customers rely on short lines to deliver lumber for residential construction. Aggregates, by the hundreds of thousand of tons per year, begin or end on short lines. All types of energy products move in trains across the state. And the largest U.S. producer of cane sugar relies on a web of rail lines operated by its short line and industrial railroads.

The state consumes more freight than its produces, which means more truckloads of freight come south with fewer opportunities to catch loads going north. This imbalance plays into the hands of short lines.

These railroads depend on outside connections, and with CSX as their main Class I interchange partner, the smaller railroads rely on a close-knit relationships with the Jacksonville, Fla.-based railroad.

"CSX interchanges over 100,000 plus shipments with its shortline partners across the state of Florida, with those shipments touching virtually every commodity," says Earnest Clark Jr., director of short lines and customer relationships at CSX. The railroad's total network interchanges about 1.4 million shipments each year.

Seminole Gulf: growth through diversification

One such partner is southwest Florida's Seminole Gulf Railway. The 111-mile short line operates two former SCL branches that Susan and Gordon Fay purchased from CSX in 1987: the 12-mile Sarasota Division between Oneco and Sarasota, and the 80-mile Fort Myers Division between Arcadia through Fort Myers to North Naples. The family's railroad has spent 37 years serving the region, starting with unit limestone trains to support major construction projects, then diversifying to better serve Florida's growing consumer base.

"That limestone helped build the Orlando airport and other central Florida

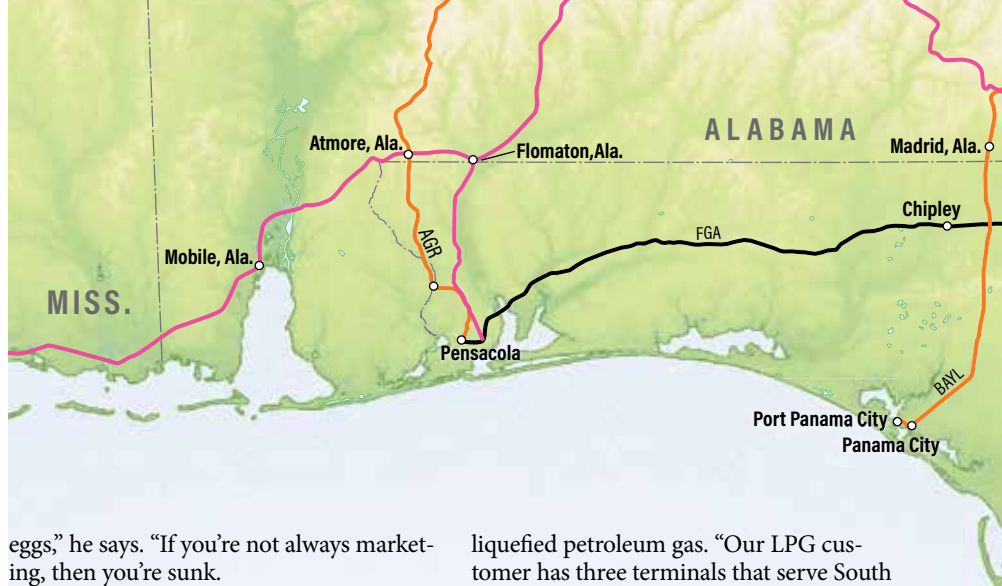
En route back to Fort Myers, Fla., from Arcadia, the Seminole Gulf Railway's DeSoto Turn crosses Shell Creek, north of Punta Gorda, Fla., on the former Atlantic Coast Line. GE B39-8 locomotives are the backbone of the railroad's fleet. Ryan Lewis

projects. These were heavy carloads that beat the heck out of the railroad,” said Robert Fay, son of Susan and Gordon, Seminole Gulf’s executive vice president. Today, the mine where those aggregates originated is home to Florida Gulf Coast University. As the rock business died off after big projects were completed in the 1990s, the SGLR entered the transloading business to build relationships with customers not directly rail served.

“We began transloading from North Fort Myers, and then we created another transload facility in Sarasota,” Fay says. “The 50- to 75-mile surrounding area is the normal transload radius for us, and we will transload as far away as Orlando and Miami.” These terminals handle building products, food, and other materials.

The railroad also went after the perishable food market. “We got into the cold-storage business with a sales call and we ended up buying the facility,” he says. “And now it’s our [rail] customer.” Florida Freezer is a full-services logistics, cold-storage, and supply-chain company with retail and wholesale customers at facilities in North Fort Myers and Miami. “It’s better to have multiple baskets with multiple

U.S. Sugar GP38-2 No. 3801 displays the company’s then-new paint scheme at Belle Glade, Fla., Oct. 14, 2024. The company’s common-carrier and private sugar-cane railroads mostly operate independently, but overlap at Clewiston, Fla. Scott A. Hartley



eggs,” he says. “If you’re not always marketing, then you’re sunk.

“Fort Myers, Cape Coral, Naples, and Sarasota are the economic engines of southwest Florida, and that activity is bleeding inland,” says Fay. He points to a ranch east of Fort Myers being developed into a community with its own neighborhoods and schools. The region is seeing a growth in multi-family housing, as well. Fay says those projects “consume a lot more drywall, dimensional lumber, and steel rebar” — all materials the railroad moves.

“We bet on the future of southwest Florida early,” he says. The railroad has forged close relationships with economic development groups to promote growth, attract rail customers, and pursue different business. It has attracted a lumber distributor, a plastics manufacturer, and a feed mill. Its second-largest commodity by volume is

liquefied petroleum gas. “Our LPG customer has three terminals that serve South Florida and they are all on short lines,” Fay says. The LPG is distributed to markets serving 15 million people.

Today, the Seminole Gulf connects to the rest of the rail network twice a week through interchanges with CSX at Oneco and Fort Myers. The railroad serves 38 customer locations and moves 5,000 carloads per year; 70% of that volume is inbound. Coming full circle, it now moves more aggregates than any other commodity, including limestone rock that supports southwest Florida’s growth.

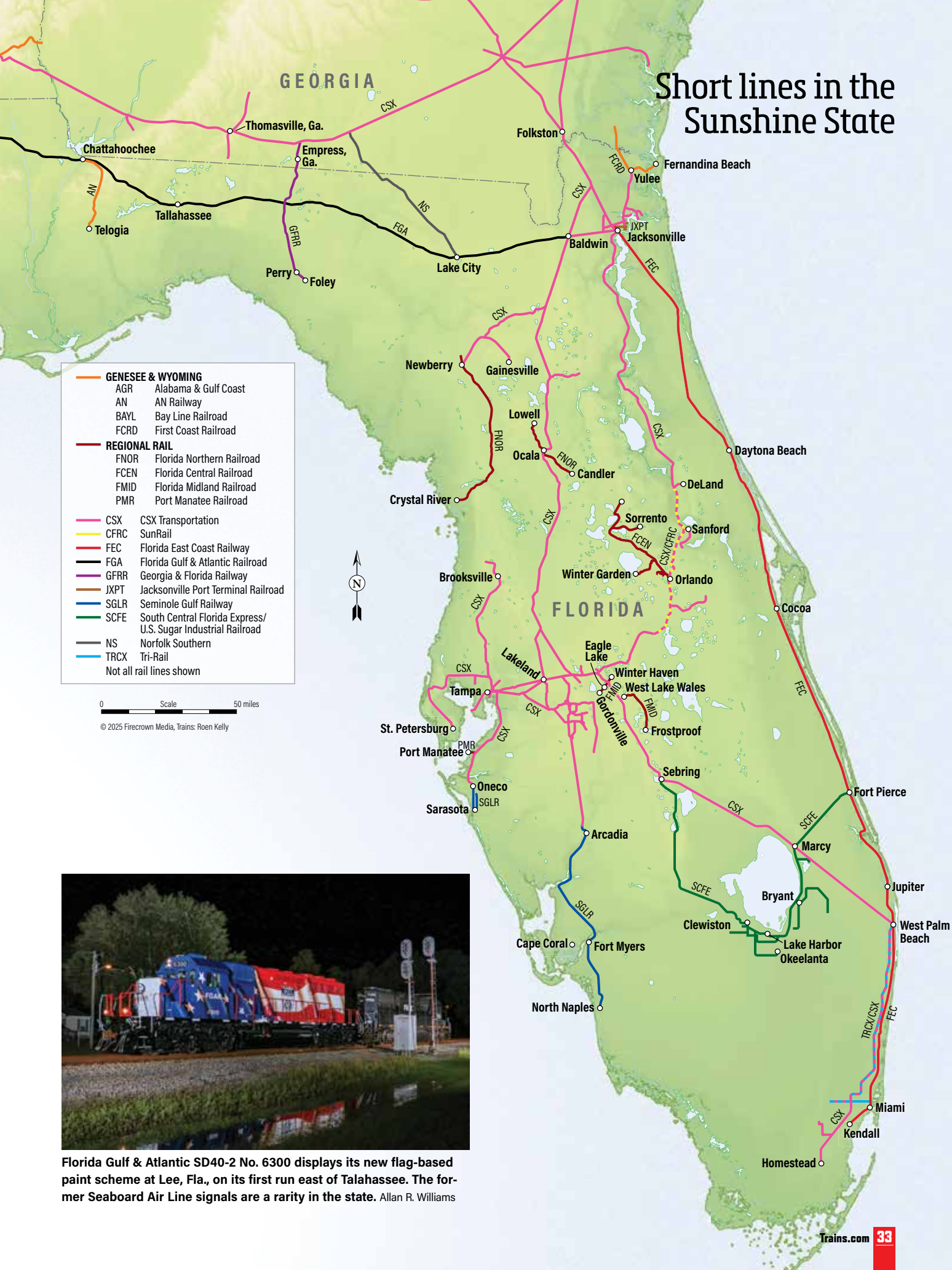
“At any given time,” Fay says, “there’s always around 200 railcars pointing to us.”

Regional Rail’s Florida family

Farther north, growth is significant in central Florida, including Tampa and



Short lines in the Sunshine State



Florida Gulf & Atlantic SD40-2 No. 6300 displays its new flag-based paint scheme at Lee, Fla., on its first run east of Tallahassee. The former Seaboard Air Line signals are a rarity in the state. Allan R. Williams



Seminole Gulf's DeSoto Turn crosses the North Fork of Alligator Creek near Punta Gorda, Fla., on April 6, 2021. The railroad was launched in 1987 by Susan and Gordon Fay, using branch lines purchased from CSX Transportation. Grady McKinley

Orlando. Regional Rail, a family of 16 short lines, has four railroads and 215 miles serving the area.

From north to south, these include:

- The 98-mile Florida Northern Railroad (FNOR) between Newberry and Crystal River, with a branch from Lowell to Candler through Ocala. It interchanges with CSX at Newberry and Ocala.
- The 75-mile Florida Central Railroad (FCEN) serving Orlando, where it interchanges with CSX, and operating west to Winter Garden and northwest to Umatilla.
- The 35-mile Florida Midland Railroad (FMID) between Tampa and Orlando, with one branch interchanging with CSX at Winter Garden and running southwest to Gordonville, and another branch interchanging with CSX at West Lake Wales, operating southeast to Frostproof.
- The 7-mile Port Manatee Railroad (PMR) near Palmetto, serving Port Manatee on Tampa Bay.

Regional Rail summarizes business across all four railroads in two words: population growth.

"Florida has the three fastest-growing counties in the country," says Matthew Schwerin, Regional Rail vice president,



The DeSoto Turn crosses the Caloosahatchee River near Tice, Fla., as it returns to Fort Myers from Arcadia, Fla. The railroad required a massive amount of rebuilding after being devastated by Hurricane Ian in September 2022. Ryan Lewis

western region. "Regional Rail serves two of them: Polk County [on the FMID] and Marion County [on the FNOR]. We are projecting four-digit carload increases from 2024 to 2025."

Regional Rail and its customers are investing to support this growth. In 2023, the FMID expanded its transload site at Eagle Lake, about halfway between Orlando and Tampa along Interstate 4, adding 30 car

spots and a 1,000-foot storage track. The FCEN has added a few hundred carloads of fly ash for the first time since the 2008 recession after a customer rehabilitated its spur in Orlando. Another FCEN customer is building a two-track yard and unloading pit on its Silver Star industrial branch, northwest of Orlando, to bring in aggregate for roadway projects.

The four railroads handle 16,000 car-



Florida Central's two GP15s, in Seaboard Coast Line-inspired paint, cross the canal connecting Lake Shipp and Lake Lulu in Winter Haven on March 2, 2024. It is one of four former Pinsly Railroad Co. lines purchased by Regional Rail.

Two photos, Casey Thomason

loads per year, with the FCEN alone handling 7,000. Asphalt, building products, and fuels make up the lion's share of carload business, all inbound. The FCEN and FNOR also churn out outbound loads of recycled materials, a commodity indicative of the region's construction activity. In the next five years, Regional Railroad is hedging on growth across most carload groups.

Maintaining this momentum requires a good working relationship with CSX, as none of the four railroads, or individual branches on the FNOR and FMID connect. All depend on CSX interchanges. "CSX delivers as a partner," Schwerin says. "The Florida Zone team, led by Superintendent Tony Ferrara, has been extremely helpful with consistent interchanges as our carloads grow, especially considering the limited capacity of interchange tracks at locations such as Winter Haven. Our growth wouldn't be sustainable without this level of teamwork at CSX."

The four Regional Rail railroads have six CSX interchanges, requiring local jobs on each railroad to work closely with their CSX counterparts. The FNOR receives cars from CSX at Newberry and Ocala. In contrast, the FCEN uses a night crew to gather inter-



Florida Central GP15s Nos. 655 and 713 work the Ragus Eagle Lake Terminal transload facility on the southwest side of Eagle Lake on March 2, 2024. The Florida Central handles about 7,000 carloads per year. Overall, Regional Rail's Florida railroads move about 16,000 carloads.

change cars and deliver them to CSX at Taft Yard in Orlando, using Central Florida Rail Corridor trackage rights on SunRail's commuter line. FMID crews at Winter Haven use CSX's mainline to access the Eloise storage track in Winter Haven, while the FMID's West Lake Wales branch relies on a two-track interchange directly served by CSX. The PMR at Port Manatee relies on a CSX local job that passes the port.

Even though the four railroads are not connected, Regional Rail manages interchange schedules and serves its fast-growing customer base through the railroads' support of each other and by minimizing its corporate structure. The railroads use a common commercial, customer service, accounting, and operations management team based in the Orlando area. The company also follows a business model



A trio of Rail USA's American flag-painted locomotives lead the Florida Gulf & Atlantic Railroad's Pensacola Shuttle west along the Bay Shore into Pensacola, Fla. The train is headed to FG&A's interchange with CSX, the line's former owner. Bradley Bates

honoring and building upon accomplishments of previous owner Pinsly Railroad Co. and its CEO John Levine [see “Pinsly: America’s pioneer shortline holding company ...,” June 2017]. Regional Rail purchased the four railroads from Pinsly in 2020.

Regional Rail also encourages local decision-making and feedback from its crew members. One recent example was an employee survey asking FCEN employees to choose between a half-dozen proposed SAL, ACL, and SCL heritage paint schemes coinciding with the railroad’s 2023 purchase of two GP15-1s, a nod to the lineage of the Regional Rail short lines. Employees chose the SCL’s black-with-yellow-stripes scheme. Schwerin says other such initiatives are on the drawing board, including a Pinsly Florida Central tribute.

Florida Gulf & Atlantic: rails across the Panhandle

The current iteration of Pinsly Railroad Co., formerly known as Gulf & Atlantic Railways, has a stronghold in the Florida Panhandle, where it owns the 430-mile Florida Gulf & Atlantic Railroad. The east-west railroad, acquired from CSX in 2019, consists of former Seaboard Air Line and Louisville & Nashville trackage, and operates the most miles of any short line in the state. It runs between Baldwin, about 20

miles west of Jacksonville, and Pensacola, through Tallahassee and Chattahoochee. The lower cost of living in the Panhandle means it is also ripe for economic growth.

Steve Laird, Florida Gulf & Atlantic assistant vice president of sales and marketing, says the large number of route-miles and the diversity of its 35 brick-and-mortar customer locations make it a unique property. “The [FGA] crosses 16 counties and 47 distinct communities,” he says. “They are all different and they are all interested in growing. The breadth of customers and commodity exposure on the FGA is fairly diversified, and that diversity of commodities provides protection against market volatility and economic downturns.”

The FGA’s carload portfolio includes construction aggregates, molten sulfur, perlite (a white volcanic glass with a wide range of uses), chemicals, potash, ethanol, plastics, farm products, metals, and food products.

In the last five years, FGA has seen carload growth in several areas. A cold storage warehouse in Lake City began moving potatoes into Florida markets in 2022 and has continued to expand. The aggregates business continues to increase as FGA works with customers to supply the Florida Department of Transportation. And farm products continue to be an important

growth area. “We have two unit-train customers that bring in unit trains of corn, typically from the Midwest,” Laird says, “and those customers bring in ancillary carload products like [distillers dried grains] and soybean meal.”

Florida’s agriculture industry requires farmers to use different types of fertilizers depending on the crop and time of year, creating year-round demand. “These customers will bring in these types of commodities,” Laird says, “and either blend for other people and ship out that way, or sometimes it’s a straight transfer to a truckload using a single type of fertilizer.”

The railroad is far from content in managing its existing customer mix. “Pinsly wants to keep growing as a company. We don’t intend to buy [railroads] and simply manage the existing business. We have partnered with our customers to add carloads and new lanes of traffic, growing the organic business,” Laird said.

FGA has also grown by attracting customers through industrial development. That, says Laird, “is where you can signifi-



Four of the railroad's 20 leased locomotives lead the inaugural run of a Florida Gulf & Atlantic train east of Greenville, Fla., on June 1, 2019. It was the first day of operation on the railroad's former CSX line between Pensacola and Baldwin, Fla. Colin Dell

cantly grow your carloads and revenue. We work closely with the counties when there are industrial development opportunities." One such initiative is the 2,600-acre North Florida Mega Industrial Park in Lake City, which announced its first tenant, a liquid fertilizer customer, in early 2024. "We are looking forward to adding them in 2025 as they build out the facility and add the rail infrastructure," he says.

Building products are another growth area. "We get a lot of inquiries from customers looking to transload products at various points on the FGA," he says. "... We don't do a tremendous amount of that business yet, but the interest is growing, and lumber, panel, and wallboard are good growth opportunities."

Jeff Castle, the FGA's general manager, shares a similar sentiment.

"[Our] biggest opportunity is the Interstate 10 corridor," Castle says. "Northern Florida has a lot of vacant land; the influx of population Florida has had over the past several years doesn't appear to be slowing down anytime soon. As more land becomes developed through business or residential reasons along the I-10 corridor, I think the FGA sits in a prime location to move construction goods."

With the FGA and county economic groups keen on growth, the railroad's oper-

ating team stands ready to accommodate demand. "Over the past year alone we have added two train and engineer employee positions in Lake City and added a day of interchange, going from five to six days per week with CSX at Baldwin Yard," Castle says. "We diversify by placing these resources into strategic locations where our assets are going to be utilized to the fullest extent. Employees and assets are strategically placed along the entire line. We have resources in Pensacola, Chipley, Tallahassee, and Lake City."

The railroad follows a regimented operating plan, which given its number of miles, is key to fluidity, according to Castle. FGA has also invested more than \$30 million in the 430-mile infrastructure in the last several years. "The operating plan, the infrastructure investment and our focus on safety at the FGA provides customers with the confidence that we will deliver," Castle says.

Georgia & Florida: OmniTRAX in the Panhandle

OmniTRAX is another shortline operator in the Panhandle. The rail and infrastructure holding company often pairs real estate deals with opportunities that help drive carloads to its railroads. The company's Georgia & Florida Railway includes 42 miles in the Panhandle, entering Florida near Empress, Ga., and terminating at Perry, about 50 miles east of Tallahassee. "Construction is our largest [carload] group in Florida and on the GFRR," says Brian Ward, OmniTRAX

senior vice president of marketing development and transload.

Ward says the company is glad to have the GFRR's connection into Florida to support growth in aggregate and related products. Even though the railroad operates most of its miles in Georgia, including four interchanges with CSX and NS, it is always marketing its capabilities. "We always like to emphasize the dual Class I access. It gives our customers a lot of flexibility and optionality." Georgia-Pacific recently idled its cellulose plant at the end of line in Foley, Fla., and while that did take away some carloads, the railroad is geared up for the next opportunity. That could be repurposing tracks in that area to support new industry or other projects. "[GFRR] is a strong railroad in the growing Southeast," Ward says.

Handling port business

Florida railroading isn't just about bringing consumables into the state. Its Gulf and Atlantic Coast access points make it a strategic maritime region. Short lines are often the first or final touchpoints for imported freight, with five serving Florida ports today.

Short line operator Genesee & Wyoming has four railroads in north Florida, serving three ports. The Alabama & Gulf Coast Railway, a regional Class II railroad, operates 51 miles in Florida, connecting Atmore, Ga., with Pensacola and its port. The Bay Line Railroad, formerly the Atlanta & St. Andrews Bay, operates 138 miles, entering Florida near Madrid, Ala., and



Genesee & Wyoming's First Coast Railroad switches boxcars at Nassau Terminal in Fernandina Beach, Fla. The 31-mile railroad, including 9 miles in Georgia, was acquired by G&W in 2005. It is one of the company's four properties serving Florida. Ryan Lewis

continuing south to Panama City and Port Panama City. The AN Railway (formerly the Apalachicola Northern) operates 36 miles from the Florida Gulf & Atlantic interchange at Chattahoochee to Telogia. And on the Atlantic Coast, the First Coast Railroad serves Fernandina Beach near Jacksonville. Those railroads also serve pulp and paper, chemical, and aggregates customers.

"G&W's four railroads in Florida handle roughly 34,000 carloads total each year," says Tom Ciuba, G&W vice president of communications. "The Bay Line Railroad moves the most traffic of our four Florida roads." Trends have weighed on some of the imported paper and pulp business, but the company is bullish it will bounce back. "Generally speaking, ports in Florida have not seen the type of growth in rail traffic that other ports along the Gulf Coast have experienced, and Panama City has been a bit challenged because of recent macro trends in the paper market," Ciuba says. "But there are opportunities for a resurgence in rail freight, particularly in Panama City, and we are hopeful that comes to fruition."

Short line company Watco operates the 10-mile Jacksonville Port Terminal Railroad at the Jacksonville Port Authority, interchanging with CSX and NS. And, as previously noted, Regional Rail's Port Man-

atee Railroad is the partner at Port Manatee, moving 1,000 carloads of food products and dry bulk products per year.

Short lines and sugar

In South Florida, a large portion of one industry, the sugarcane business, rests on the shoulders of a short line and private industrial railroad. In contrast to the emphasis on inbound carload freight elsewhere in the state, U.S. Sugar's two railroads are the first steps in the sugarcane supply chain, shuttling cane from Florida farmlands to the company's mill at Clewiston. *Trains* last visited these railroads a decade ago [see "100% Pure Cane Railroad," December 2015].

South Central Florida Express, Inc., is the sugar maker's common-carrier short line and a conduit between the U.S. Sugar Industrial Railroad, its private railroad, and the national rail network. It connects with CSX at Sebring and Marcy, and the FEC at Fort Pierce.

The short line came into existence when the sugarmaker purchased the 91-mile South Florida Central Railroad, former ACL trackage from Sebring to Okeelanta, in 1994. It nearly doubled in miles four years later after reaching an agreement with FEC to operate from Lake Harbor to Fort Pierce, creating a U-shaped network

loosely tracing Lake Okeechobee. Today's 171-mile short line connects with the private sugar railroad at Clewiston and Bryant. The sugar railroad operates 38 miles of sugar branches west of Clewiston and a separate 36 miles of branches east of Bryant, tapping more than 300 square miles of farmland.

The sugar railroad delivers cane directly to Clewiston's Sugar Yard, the only location where short line and sugar trains coexist. Elsewhere, the railroads and their crews operate independently. Cane harvested from branches east of Bryant is handled by the short line for final-mile delivery to Clewiston. The short line serves other on-line U.S. Sugar elevators, as well as locations that are competitors to U.S. Sugar, and aggregate and agricultural customers.

As of September 2024, U.S. Sugar had originated more than 206,000 carloads of cane that year, including 146,000 cars on the sugar railroad and 60,000 carloads on the short line, moving mostly in its fleet of 800-plus rotary-dump hoppers. This is equal to more than 8 million net tons of

sugarcane-by-rail through the first eight months of 2024. The two railroads' business picks up significantly when the six-month harvest begins each year in October.

The short line has also moved 8,000 merchandise carloads, including 2,800 carloads of molasses, 2,600 carloads of refined sugar, and 2,900 other carloads, according to information provided by U.S. Sugar. About 60% of the molasses and refined sugar produced by U.S. Sugar each year moves outbound on the short line, with 40% handled by truck. Florida is responsible for 50% of the sugarcane produced in the U.S. and for 19,000 jobs and a \$4.7 billion contribution to the state's economy each year, according to a 2022 study by Texas A&M University.

Making it all work

Short lines live and die by their carloads, making sales and marketing efforts the centerpiece of their business plan. Creative ways of doing business pay the bills. But few short lines are self-sustaining, needing to tap into the rest of the national rail network through interchanges, as recognized by Regional Rail's focus on coordinating its local service with CSX. The secret sauce to carload gains extends beyond operational alignment. CSX's marketing and sales teams are actively involved, helping price carloads into regions where short lines can get a hold of the traffic. "CSX connects to over 240 short lines that have a meaningful contribution to CSX's success," says Clark, the CSX official.

He says it is imperative CSX and its connecting carriers collaborate on new service and solutions that increase rail's share of a customer's transportation spend, focusing on actions like shared investment, operating alignment, and joint marketing. CSX has a three-pillar strategy when collaborating with short lines — engagement, service, and growth.

Engagement involves regular meetings with partner railroads to review what's working, opportunities for improvement, and ways to grow. These include sharing market and customer intelligence, industrial development opportunities, and new products and solutions. "And it is not just words," Clark says. "CSX conducts joint sales calls, joint outreach with development and public agencies, and collaborates with landowners and other constituents."

The second piece is service. The railroad applies the same rigorous standards to interchange deliveries and pickup as it does to servicing customers. "After all, interchange performance is nothing more than local service," Clark says. With this granular approach, the railroad is better equipped to identify opportunities for



South Central Florida Express's Fort Pierce Turn crosses the St. Lucie Canal lift bridge at Port Mayaca, Fla., on Jan. 12, 2017. Thanks to its sugar cane traffic, the railroad is a Florida rarity because it handles more outbound than inbound traffic. David Lassen

improvement, address inefficiencies, and ensure better reliability and service for everyone. When issues arise, the railroad leans on its customer solutions and shortline teams, and other Class I departmental resources.

The third pillar is growth. "CSX is focused on growth and short lines play a role in that growth, in large part because short lines extend CSX's geographic and customer reach," Clark says. "However, it is more than just location. It is about collaboration to identify and cultivate opportunities, often requiring considerable patience and

creativity to onboard opportunities. And to that end, CSX brings a lot to bear across its entire organization, including expertise from numerous departments that can assist in supporting new or reinforcing existing ideas," Clark says.

"CSX is embarking on a journey to create a more customer-centric approach to its shortline relationships. CSX and its shortline partners' ability to deliver an excellent service product together is paramount in supporting the service the ultimate rail customer receives. And that is critical to growing traffic for all parties." I

The last mile

Trains 2025 Photo Contest winners



THE END OF A TRIP, a delivery made, or the conclusion of a shift. All represent the Last Mile — a railroad concept that can be illustrated through container ships and double stacks, shortline transload yards, museums, and even a worker carrying a crate off a boxcar. The Last Mile transcends time and is older than railroading itself.

Entries for the 2025 *Trains*-National Railway Historical Society Photo Contest garnered a wide variety of interpretation to consider. Entries varied from

modern to vintage images and were not limited to capture in the U.S., but illustrated railway scenes from across the globe. This year, 330 entries were received from 136 photographers.

The Grand Prize image, from Todd Halamka, is an early morning view of the Munich (Germany) Main Station, which is “the last mile” for many travelers returning home or beginning a European visit. Russell Sullivan took the First Place image. His near-dawn view of a NJ Transit Comet III

car being scrapped while a modern consist races past is a juxtaposition of old and new. In Second Place, Oren Helbok shot a spectacular, although literal and morbid, interpretation of the theme. His capture of a MBTA PCC car whisking passengers past a graveyard just after sunrise demonstrates a wealth of photographic forethought and patience.

Our five runners-up all present interesting thematic views. The judges found Alan Shaw’s shot of a rail worker hand carry-

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In addition to other prizes,
all winners will receive
a one-year NRHS
membership.

ing goods the last hundred feet to a customer and Bryan Bechtold’s image of tank cars being spotted for truck transloading to be especially representative of the theme. — *Jeffrey S. Smith and Bob Lettenberger*

Runners-up

These photographers have each won a three-year subscription to *Trains* Magazine or equivalent *Trains* products.



◀ Eric Williams

The enginehouse in Greenwich, N.Y., is the end of the line for the Batten Kill Railroad. For the majority of the year, its Alcos were kept close to where they worked, but during the winter, the venerable RS3s were brought inside as refuge from the freezing cold. On Feb. 22, 2017, the last rays of winter sunshine filter into the Batten Kill’s enginehouse as the crew prepares to move No. 605 in for the night.

- Canon 6D
- Canon 24-105mm lens; 32mm
- ISO 400; f5.6; 1/100 sec.

▲ Bryan Bechtold

With fewer industries directly served by rail today, the last-mile move is often made by truck. Short lines have capitalized on this, creating team tracks in any space available for intermodal transfers. It’s all about customer service and making the most of a railroad’s assets for business growth. In Elk Grove, Ill., the Chicago Junction Railway spots tank cars for truck transfer on June 13, 2024.

- Nikon D780
- 17-35mm f 2.8 lens; 17mm
- ISO 400; f18; 1/800 sec.



▲ Christopher Pollock

My interpretation of "The Last Mile" is both literal and symbolic. In a juxtaposition of old and new, this snowy scene shows the final mile of a freight delivery as a century-old steam locomotive, Strasburg Rail Road No. 89, pulls a modern double-door boxcar and covered hopper to the East Strasburg, Pa., yard for unloading. While once common, steam-powered freight deliveries in a rural setting, such as this one, have also seen their last mile.

- Nikon D7100
- ISO 250, f4.5, 1/640



▲ Alan Shaw

In a world of complicated supply chains, service sometimes still comes down to a simple act. A crew member unlocks the door of a railcar and manually unloads boxes of crisps, putting them in the local goods shed. That's what was happening here as one of Queensland Rail's little trains stopped at Talwood, Queensland, Australia, for a few minutes before getting on its way to Dirranbandi, on the morning of Nov. 6, 2008. A little later in the day, the shopkeeper across the road will come over and collect the boxes, completing the last mile between supplier and shop. These little trains, what I called "Quirky Rail," finished their journey on spindly 40-pound rail, and finally succumbed to economic reality a couple of years after this photo.

- Konica Minolta Dynax 7D
- Tamron 17-50 f2.8 lens; 17mm
- ISO 200; f8; 1/350 sec.



▲ Steve Patterson

When I stepped off the train at the summit, I thought, "We're really at the END of the line! STOP here or we're finished!" With the rail extending into the air at 14,115 feet in elevation, I could see a photograph was at hand. (The Broadmoor Manitou & Pikes Peak Cog Railway climbs Pikes Peak in Colorado's Rocky Mountain Front Range.)

- Nikon D50
- AF-S DX Zoom Nikkor 16-135, 20mm
- ISO 400; f11, 1/500 sec.

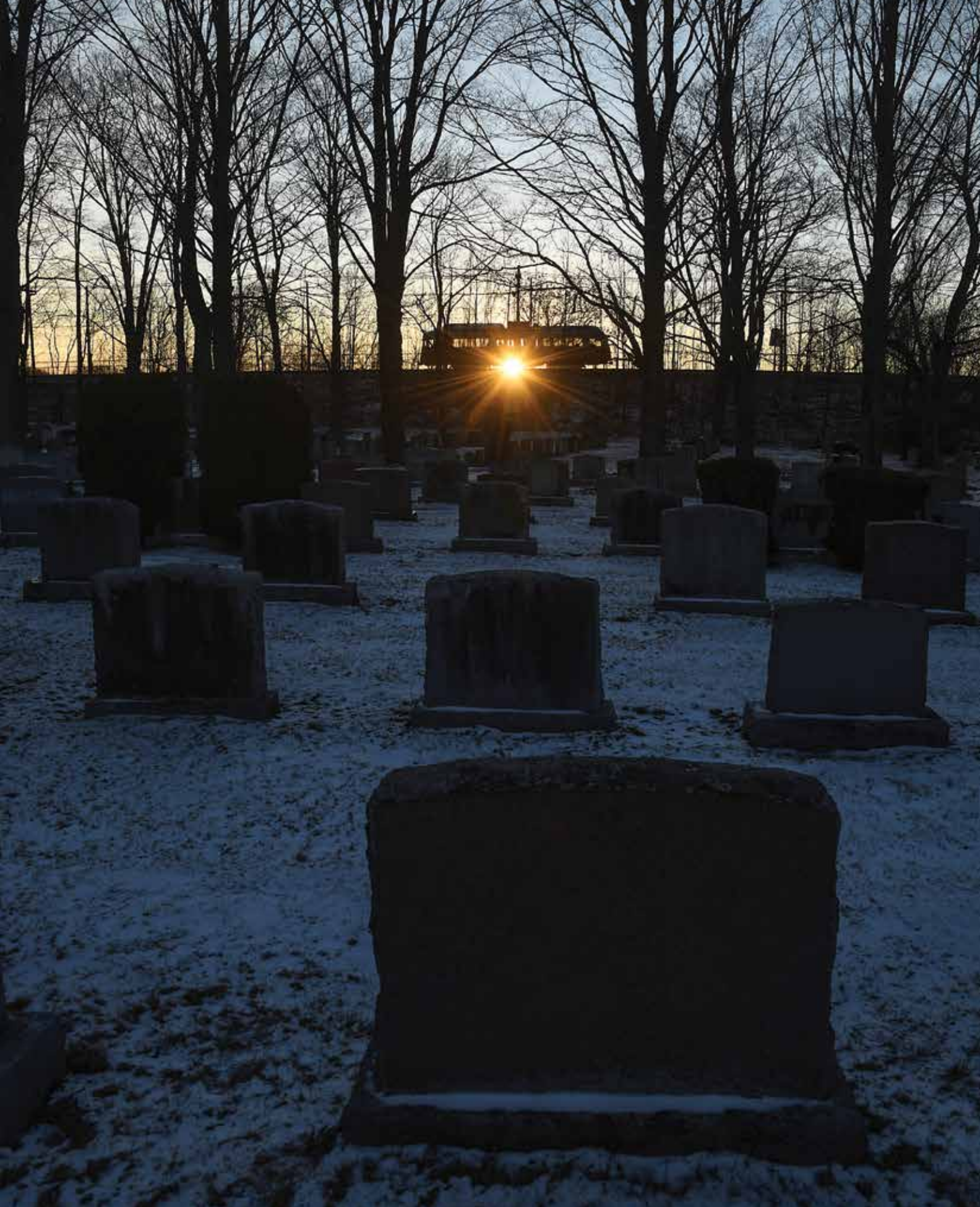
Second place

► Oren B. Helbok

Won \$250 for his MBTA PCC car photo.

On Feb. 2, 2025 — Groundhog Day — an eastbound MBTA PCC car greets the sunrise passing through Cedar Grove Cemetery on the southern edge of Boston's Dorchester section. This is the last mile of its run from Mattapan. About 4,000 feet ahead, the car and its handful of passengers will reach Ashmont, where the trolley will turn on the loop for the 2.6-mile return to Mattapan. Most, if not all, of the passengers will transfer to the Red Line subway for the 5-mile trip to downtown Boston. Since 1870, the cemetery has hosted nearly 45,000 burials; each of those people having walked their last mile. Remarkably, the six active PCC cars on the Mattapan High-Speed Line, all built in 1945 and 1946, continue to provide service 20 hours per day every day on headways as little as 5 minutes in each direction (and as of summer 2025 never more than 13 minutes apart, even on Sundays and holidays); these cars have yet to run their last miles.

- Nikon D850
- 24-120 lens; 24mm
- ISO 800; f10; 1/640th sec.



First place

► Russell Sullivan

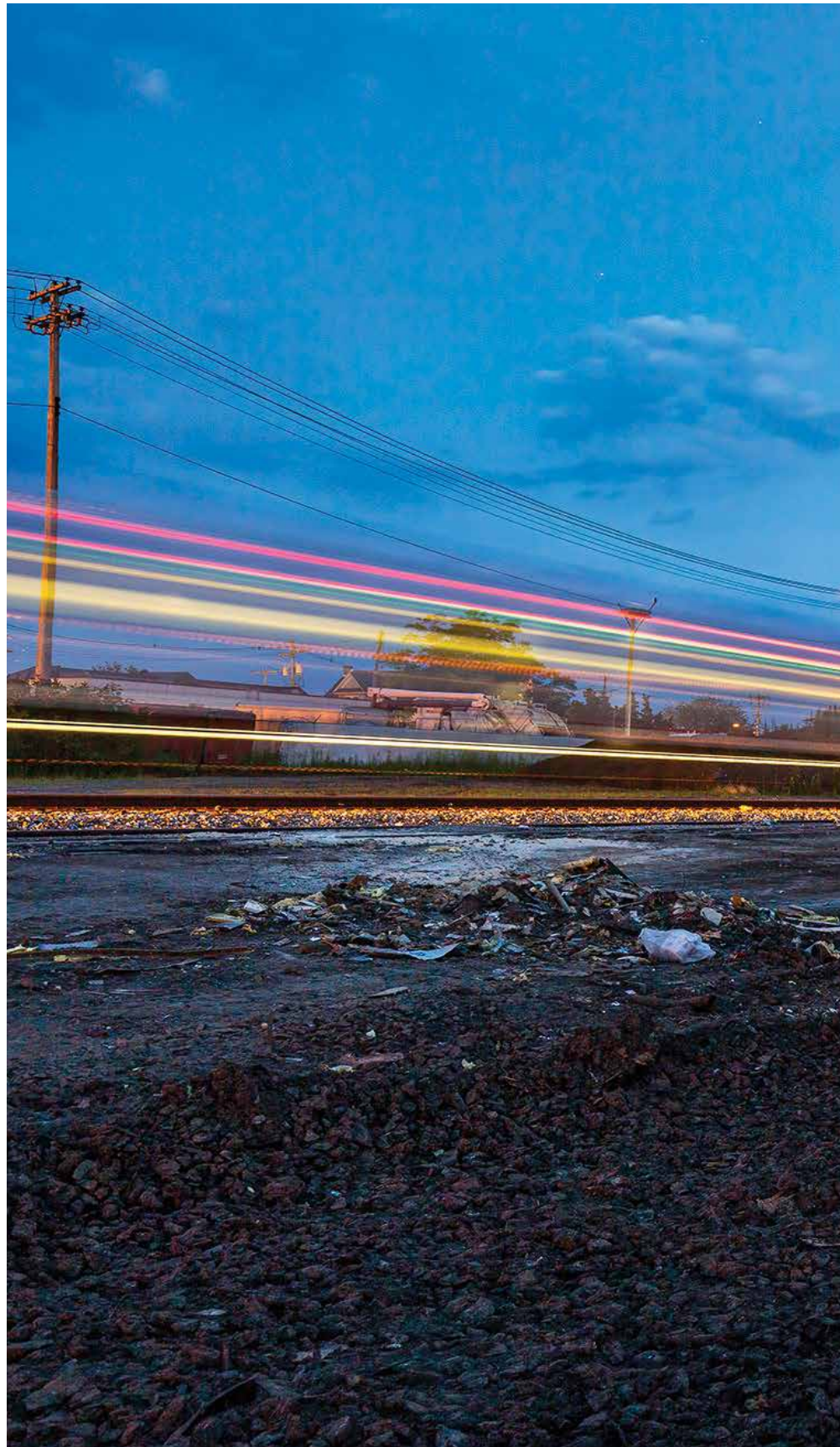
Won \$500 for his NJ Transit past and present photo.

For decades, NJ Transit's Comet III No. 5003, a Bombardier push-pull control car, carried thousands of people across New Jersey — workers starting their day, students heading to class, and families returning home. They were sleek, modern, and once a symbol of progress. As newer, more advanced equipment was introduced, the Comet IIIs were gradually phased out, quietly slipping from the front lines of service to the system edges.

The Comet IIIs' last service miles were run along the North Jersey Coast Line. Neptune Yard — located along the Coast Line — was at the end of the last mile for these cars.

Frozen here is the bittersweet moment of transition. Once-proud railcars, now still and stripped of purpose, are scrapped while a newer NJ Transit train glides by, with passengers and purpose. One train says goodbye, the other presses on. The torch is always being passed.

- Canon 5D Mark III
- Canon EF16-35 f/4L IS USM; 22mm
- ISO 125; f/11; 13 sec.







Grand Prize

▲ Todd Halamka

Won \$1,000 for his Munich station photo.

The Munich Main Station awakens to a new day as a dozen trains prepare to depart. The day's first arrival is completing its journey and entering the station. Munich Main Station — one of the largest railway stations in Europe — consists of 32 platforms



serving cities in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, and France. The current structure, which includes multiple additions, has been in continuous operation since 1849. It functions like a city within the city housing retail shops, hotels, a post office, and office space. It also provides direct connections to subway, elevated rail, and bus lines. Munich Main Station serves 450,000 daily passengers, with an average of 250 long-distance trains and 500 local trains.

- Canon 5D Mark III
- Canon EF 70-200mm 1:2.8 L IS II USM lens; 123mm
- ISO 1250; f/11; 1 sec.

Rock Island sunset



In 1978 the handwriting was on the wall

by Jim A. Christen

IN THE LATE 1970S, time was running out for the remnants of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific's once-extensive passenger train fleet. The railroad could not afford the initiation fee to join Amtrak in 1971 and was obliged to continue operating its two remaining passenger trains — the *Quad Cities Rocket*, train Nos. 5 and 6 between Chicago and Rock Island, Ill., and *The Peorian*, train Nos. 11 and 12 between Chicago and Peoria, Ill.

By 1978, after numerous petitions to discontinue them, the *Rockets* were run-

ning out their final miles. Indeed, the entire railroad was less than two years from extinction.

I'm one of the few old enough to remember riding a Rock Island-operated intercity passenger train. I was 8 years old at the time, too young to comprehend the reality of the railroad's financial woes. However, my dad knew the Rock was on borrowed time. If there was ever an opportunity to ride the old Rock Island Line, it was now!

On Sunday, May 28, 1978, we boarded the *Quad Cities Rocket* from downtown

Rock Island Bicentennial E8A No. 652 rolls into Blue Island, Ill., with the two-car *Quad Cities Rocket* on a rainy May 30, 1976. The destination for this eastbound train is Chicago's LaSalle Street Station, 16 miles away. W.T. Morgan

Chicago to Joliet, Ill. I don't recall how we purchased a ticket for a trip on the *Rocket* within suburban territory. Commuter-zone tickets were not honored on the Rock's long-distance trains. Perhaps we purchased tickets to Morris, Ill., (one stop beyond Joliet) and detrained at Joliet Union Station. Regardless, we were able to ride 40 miles on a Rock Island intercity passenger train.

We began our trip at downtown Chicago's decrepit LaSalle Street Station. Even at a young age, I could discern this station's heyday had long since passed.



In the trainshed of Chicago's LaSalle Street Station on May 28, 1978, the author, age 8 at the time, is photographed beside Rock Island Electro-Motive Division E8A *Independence*, painted for the nation's bicentennial in 1976. The two-car train is the *Quad Cities Rocket*, bound for Rock Island, Ill. Jim A. Christen collection

The abandoned Pullman check-in counters and Red Cap stations hadn't seen a passenger in ages. The cavernous wasted space in the waiting room seemed like a step back into a lost era. Even the trainshed had lost its roof, and the litter-strewn tracks and platforms looked outdated, neglected, and ancient — even by 1978 standards.

It was an extremely hot and humid Sunday afternoon. We witnessed a couple of RI suburban trains arrive and depart with Pullman-Standard red-and-yellow bi-level commuter cars making up their consists. At last, we saw the two Rock Island intercity passenger trains being shoved down to the depot tracks. Our *Quad Cities Rocket* was the first of the two scheduled trains to depart. It was powered by Electro-Motive E8A No. 652, the *Inde-*

pendence, painted in attractive and still intact 1976 American Bicentennial livery.

Behind its drawbar were two coaches, one built by Pullman the other built by the Budd Co. I recall thinking the stainless steel Budd coach looked more inviting prior to boarding. Once aboard, it was a different story. On this hot and muggy afternoon, the air conditioning in the Pullman was pumping out unbelievable amounts of icy air while the Budd coach had absolutely no airflow whatsoever and its interior temperature was nearing 100 degrees. Once we got on the road, our conductor opened the Budd coach's back door, producing a flow of air that considerably cooled the car.

As for on-board amenities, a 4x4 sheet of plywood covered by a red and white checkered tablecloth was placed across the tops of two seat backs. This "buffet service" consisted of prepackaged sandwiches, chips, soft drinks, and candy bars — a far cry from the sit-down dining car service discontinued a couple of years before.

I vaguely remember the station stops at Englewood and Blue Island. The part of the trip I most vividly recall was rocketing down the mainline through Tinley Park and Mokena while standing near the opened back door watching the track receding in a cloud of dust. The *Independence* had us moving every bit of 79 mph over the jointed rail. By this time, Rock Island's

physical plant had suffered years of deferred maintenance, but of course this was suburban territory, so the track was probably in better shape than the main line west of Joliet.

The conductor was a friendly, jovial man who seemed pleased to have us aboard his train. We passed under Interstate 80 east of Joliet and paralleled old US 30 (the Lincoln Highway). All too soon, we were braking for the Joliet station stop and banging across the diamonds in front of Union Station. My mother and sisters were there to greet us.

We waited approximately a half-hour to witness the arrival of the Rock's second intercity train, *The Peorian*. This train consisted of a well-weathered and battered E8 in a faded maroon Rock Island paint scheme and two Pullman coaches. Although I didn't realize it at the time, this was the last Rock Island passenger train I would see. Seven months later, on Dec. 31, 1978, the final westbound Rock Island passenger train in revenue service pulled out of LaSalle Street Station into a New Year's Eve blizzard and into history.

I'm grateful to my dad for giving me the opportunity to ride the Rock Island while it was still a common carrier. I advise anyone to take advantage of opportunities while one has the chance. No train can outrun time itself and tomorrow or next year may be too late. **I**



Baltimore Streetcar Museum envisions major expansion

Grant received to secure old Ma & Pa roundhouse

▲ The Baltimore Streetcar Museum's future vision includes renovating the 1910 Maryland & Pennsylvania Railroad roundhouse as a new campus anchor. The roundhouse is about a half-mile north of its current location. The site would anchor a new recreational corridor along the Jones Falls waterway. Ziger | Snead Architects, Baltimore Streetcar Museum

IT IS GOING TO BE A BIG STEP — a big step forward and in the right direction for the future of the Baltimore Streetcar Museum. The museum's vision has two main parts: Move from an all-volunteer organization, growing into one with a paid, professional staff; and develop a new campus site by renovating an old railroad roundhouse.

"This is an ambitious plan," says new museum Executive Director Matt Nawn. "It will be a phased development with our goal of completion in 10 years."

Nawn, himself, is part of the plan. A long-time transit enthusiast and museum member/volunteer, he was named executive director in June 2025. He is the museum's first paid, professional executive director — the beginning of a full-time staff. Even with a paid staff, volunteers will continue to play a vital role.

Previously, Nawn was chief of technical services for the Federal Transit Administration, a position from which he retired early. Nawn describes the timing of his retirement and the museum position opening as "fortunate circumstances."

The second part of the museum's development vision also holds fortunate circumstances. The museum is located along

the Jones Falls corridor, about 2 miles north of downtown Baltimore and attractions like the National Aquarium and the B&O Railroad Museum. The City of Baltimore and the Friends of the Jones Falls would like the corridor to become a recreational destination. The streetcar museum would be a main anchor running along Falls Road and the waterway. And now, the old roundhouse.

About a half-mile northwest along Falls Road — the route of the museum's electrified track — sits the 1910 ex-Maryland & Pennsylvania Railroad roundhouse. Baltimore owns the property, using it to park trucks and store road salt. The museum's vision includes rehabilitating the facility and making it the campus anchor. Presently, says Nawn, the museum is in exclusive negotiations with Baltimore to secure the roundhouse site.

"Our current site and right-of-way are owned by the city," Nawn says. "We have a great relationship with a long-term lease. For the roundhouse, we would be seeking a lease of 50 or 100 years."

Earlier this year, the city granted the museum \$165,000 to begin stabilizing the roundhouse, which has suffered dete-

rioration from salt storage. The museum plan calls for roundhouse work to be completed in phases with each phase preparing for the next. "The site has some floodway issues," Nawn says. "We want to get grading done first to correct this, then move on to the next steps."

The estimated project cost: \$28 million. That, Nawn explains, "... is in-the-door on day one with the renovated building, exhibits, and staffing needs." He also realizes that the current estimate will change over the plan's 10-year run.

As the future vision unfolds, the museum anticipates increased revenues. While greater attendance is planned, venue rentals and educational programming will also play a key role. The museum has become a sought-after wedding venue.

As the museum embarks on its future vision, learning is one of the key planning elements. "We are listening to a lot of people right now," Nawn says. "We are talking to other museums, planners, fund-raising consultants ... We want to hear what they have to say and learn how it could help us."

For more information, visit: baltimorestreetcarmuseum.org. — Bob Lettenberger

Ehernberger Collection at American Heritage Center expands

Former UP employee donates balance of his railroad collection

JIM EHERNBERGER, 88, HAS NOW BEEN RETIRED LONGER than his time working for the Union Pacific. Yet, Ehernberger still considers himself a railroad man. Over the years, he has amassed a collection of documents, maps, and photographs detailing western U.S. railroad activity. While he previously donated a portion of his collection to the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming (Laramie, Wyo.), he has now contributed the balance to that institution.

According to the AHC website, the James L. Ehernberger Western Railroad Collection holds materials dating from 1849 to 2024. The collection can be measured as 649.42 cubic feet or 1,138 archival boxes plus 30 megabytes of digital material.

Ehernberger's railroad passion was kindled at age 15 when he rode a Rocky Mountain Railroad Club excursion over Wyoming's Sherman Hill in May 1953. On board that train he struck up a conversation with one of the many camera-toting rail enthusiasts. The gentleman asked if Ehernberger would be interested in buying a

camera. The man turned out to be a local yardmaster, who hired Ehernberger that July when he turned 16. Getting hired was conditioned on Ehernberger buying the yardmaster's camera.

That turn of events started two phases of Ehernberger's life: A 35-year career with the Union Pacific Railroad and a passion for railroad photography that netted thousands of photos including steam locomotives, trains and depots. It also opened the door to writing books and magazine articles about western railroading.

WHAT'S IN THE COLLECTION?

PHOTOGRAPHS — Ehernberger says he has provided the American Heritage Center with more than 100,000 black-and-white negatives and another 50,000 photos. He photographed all 25 Big Boys, cataloged western depots before they were torn down, and chronicled the transition from steam to diesel power. After retirement, Ehernberger made international trips — with his camera — recording railroads around the world. Some of his earliest photos

were published by *Trains* in the 1950s [see "Photo Section," March 1955].

BOOKS — Nearly 1,000 books are included in the current donation, all of which focus on some aspect of railroading. The books will be housed in the AHC's Tappan Rare Book Library, according to Center Historian Kail Moede.

Beyond collecting railroad books, Ehernberger is credited as author on more than 50 books, including *Union Pacific's Cheyenne Facilities 1868 - 2015*, *Union Pacific Nebraska Depots*, and *Smoke Down the Canyons: Union Pacific Idaho Division*.

DOCUMENTS — Think of just about any railroad document and there is a good chance it is in the Ehernberger collection. Most of the documents are from the Union Pacific, but other western railroads are represented. Building plans, accident reports, financial records, even correspondence among executives can be found in this collection.

There are UP engineering maps dating to 1886. Might you be interested in how the Burl-

ington operated in Wyoming during the horrendous blizzard of 1949? The records from the Casper, Wyo., dispatcher are part of the collection. There are letters from William Jeffers, UP president, to the board of directors making the case to order the Big Boy locomotives.

Ehernberger stays active in railroading. He still visits the UP steam shop in Cheyenne, plays a role in the Union Pacific Historical Society, and corresponds with those asking railroad-related questions.

In this collection spanning well over a century of U.S. railroading, there are ordinary objects and others with an artistic flare. One of Ehernberger's images was recently awarded third place in the black-and-white category as part of the annual photography competition hosted by the Center for Railroad Photography & Art. The 2025 theme was "smoke." Ehernberger submitted a 1959 image of a Colorado & Southern Railway locomotive hauling cars up grade 30 miles north of Cheyenne in a light snow. The locomotive was retired three months after the photo was shot. — *Trains staff*

PRESERVATION BRIEFS

Group to restore NP 2-8-0

The **ENGINE 25 RESTORATION GROUP** in Butte, Mont., has plans to cosmetically restore **NORTHERN PACIFIC 2-8-0 NO. 25** and enhance its exhibit environment with a new shelter and interpretive labels. The locomotive,

built in 1899, is located at the front of the Butte Civic Center. No. 25 is the last of 13 such locomotives used on Homestake Pass. For more details, visit engine25.org. Engine 25, Al Hess

Also in Butte: **THE VIRGINIA & TRUCKEE RAILROAD** sent **1914 BALDWIN 2-8-2 NO. 18** and **THREE PASSENGER COACHES** via semitruck from Carson City, Nev., to Montana for the filming of Paramount's series *1923*, a prequel to the popular show *Yellowstone*.

The 900-mile move required five trailers. No. 18 weighs 90 tons.

The **EAST TROY RAILROAD MUSEUM** received a \$10,000 donation from the **CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY'S** Community Giving Program. The funds will support infrastructure improvements, specifically tie replacement along the museum's main line between East Troy and Mukwonago, Wis. The 7-mile line is the sole remaining segment of an electrified interurban network

that reached Sheboygan, Milwaukee, Watertown, Kenosha, and East Troy, Wis.

In September 2024, Hurricane Helene dealt a blow to southern U.S. railroads and railroad attractions. In August, nearly a year after the storm, the **OLD FORT TRAIN DEPOT MUSEUM** (Old Fort, N.C.) reopened. The museum is the starting point for the grade up to the **OLD FORT LOOPS**. The museum is open the fourth Sunday monthly.





A visit to Scranton

Where 'Lackawanna' is a household word

▲ Scranton's Radisson Lackawanna Station Hotel captures the elegance of early 20th century travel. This six-story Beaux-Arts style building includes two restaurants and displays a variety of railroad art and photographs.

Four photos, Brian Solomon

THIS SUMMER, my wife Kris and I took a three-day railroad-themed mini-vacation to Scranton, Pa. This fascinating place is a wonderful way to experience history. Scranton is a complex, layered city with many fascinating elements of railroading to explore and enjoy, but you need to take the time to seek it out — both at rail level and underground.

The city was built and prospered on the mining and transportation of anthracite coal in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was the nucleus of the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad, which by the dawn of the 20th century was among the richest of American railroads. Yet DL&W was only one of eight railroads that blanketed the coal-rich Lackawanna Valley. The name "Lackawanna" is derived from the Lanape language and, translated, means "forking river." While railroad enthusiasts associate this name

with DL&W and the ill-fated merger with Erie in 1960 that created Erie Lackawanna, the name is a household word in Scranton — which is located in Lackawanna County — and associated with many institutions throughout the valley.

We stayed at the Radisson Lackawanna Station Hotel, the beautifully restored former DL&W main passenger station situated on the east side of downtown. This architectural gem was designed in the neoclassical Beaux-Arts



The Steamtown National Historic Site is a museum of American railroading that displays a variety of steam locomotives, many saved from scrapping by the late Nelson Blount, and offers a range of interpretive railroad displays.

French-Renaissance style by Kenneth Murchison and constructed in 1908. The Station Hotel is a testimony to the magnificence of the Golden Age of American rail travel. When you step inside you're transported back in time to the thrill and elegance of classic long distance rail travel. We stayed on the sixth floor (which was added to the original structure in the 1920s) in a room behind the immense clock that faces the street.

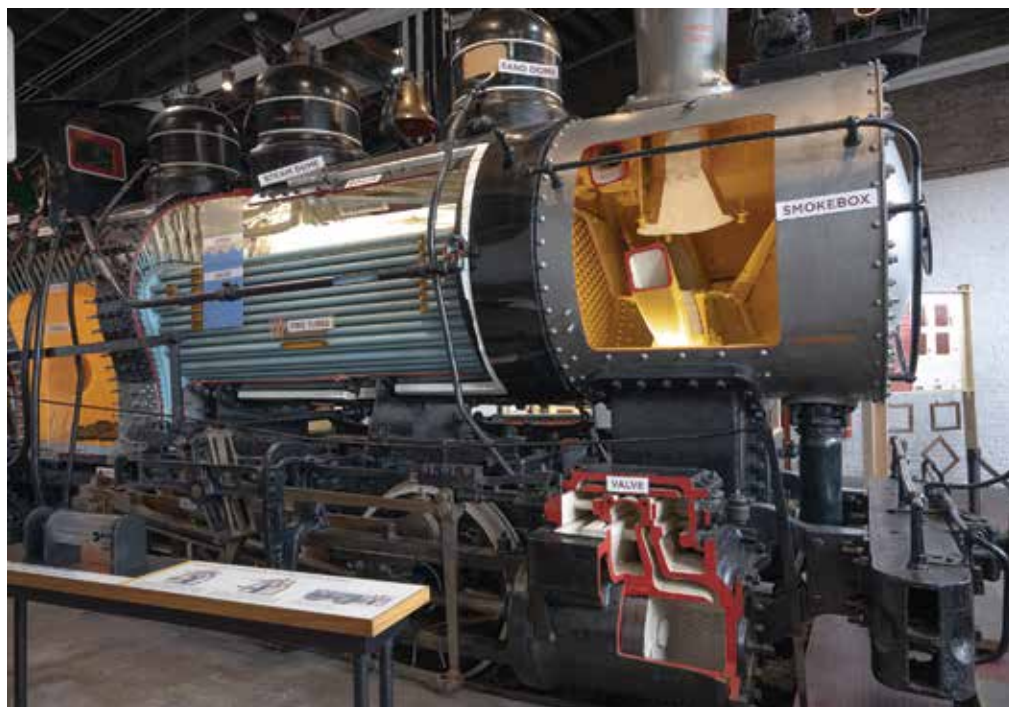
I was pleased to see a large print of David Plowden's atmospheric image of steam-heated passenger train boarding at the station in the 1960s.

Although this was my first stay in this hotel, I have visited Scranton many times over the years. My first was in 1981 on a Pennsylvania vacation; my dad brought us to the once-busy station, only to find it was a ruined shadow of its former greatness, symbolic of the dilapidated state of old DL&W.

The multiple tracks in front of the station once hosted 60 or more daily trains, but with decline of anthracite traffic after the 1920s, the railroad and its successors suffered myriad financial problems. Passenger service ended before Amtrak, Erie Lackawanna was melded into Conrail, and by 1980 surviving vestiges of DL&W east of Scranton no longer served as a through route.

STEAMTOWN AND BEYOND

The tide turned for Scranton's railroad heritage in the mid-1980s, when Vermont's Steamtown collection was relocated from Bellows Falls to Scranton's former DL&W Shop complex. Today, the Steamtown National Historic Site is run by the National Park Service and offers a wonderful interpretive museum. Steamtown delineates American railroading, telling the story of railroads in Pennsylvania and the importance of the DL&W to Scranton. Centered on an old roundhouse, Steamtown offers visitors a safe, sanitized venue to learn and explore steam and diesel locomotives and freight cars from many railroads, including the



Among the most fascinating exhibits at Steamtown is a cut-away steam locomotive that has been opened, painted, and lit to reveal its inner workings, including the boiler, smoke box, and valve assemblies.

DL&W. During peak season, Steamtown is open from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission to Steamtown is free.

Scranton is known as The Electric City because of its pioneering use of electric streetcars in the 1880s. The Electric City Trolley Museum is located on the Steamtown grounds, but is run separately from the Park Service site. It has preserved a variety of electric vehicles and features its own museum.

This museum runs trips on a portion of the old Laurel Line electric interurban. Opening hours are limited; for details, see ectma.org/museum.html.

Across the former DL&W yard from the Steamtown site is The Market Place at Steamtown, a multi-level shopping mall. It includes a theater and the excellent Electric City Aquarium (with an electric eel among its many aquatic residents). An elevated open walkway between the mall and the Steamtown site offers an excellent place to photograph the historic railroad equipment and the occasional passing freights operated by Genesee Valley Transportation's Delaware-Lackawanna short line, famous for its well-maintained vintage Alco diesels.

THE UNDERGROUND STORY

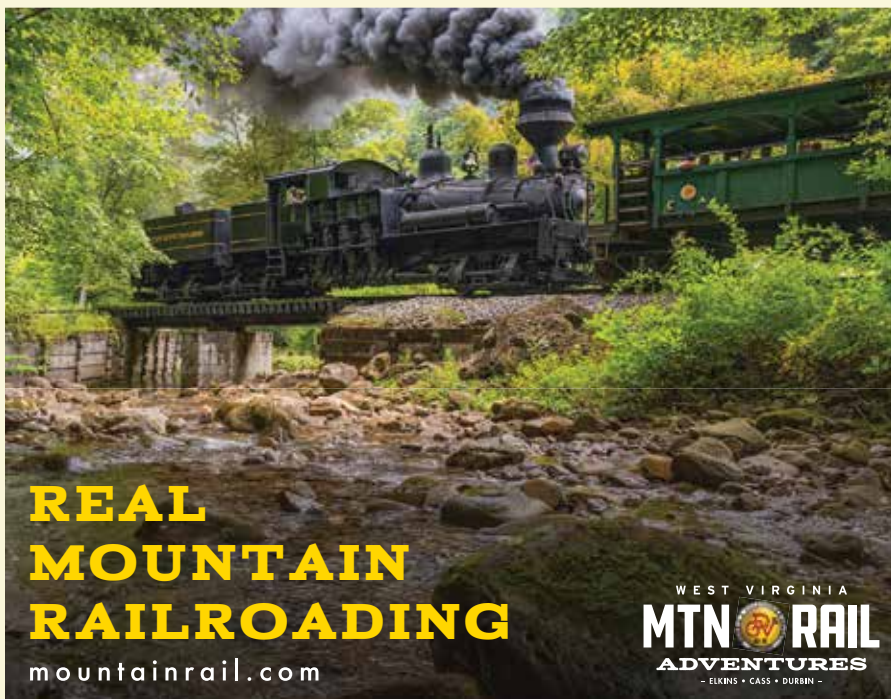
The highlight of our visit was the Lackawanna Coal Mine Tour. We arrived at opening time, 10 a.m., bought our tickets, watched a film about the trials and suffering faced by coal miners more than a century ago, then boarded a cable-hauled railcar that lowered us deep into the old anthracite mine. Once underground, our guide, John, led us on an extensive walking tour.

The mine tour is an incredible experience, and key to understanding the development

of Scranton's railroads. When you buy your ticket, you sign a release because, although inactive for almost 60 years, this mine is the real deal. Underground, you'll follow the tracks through tunnels, where you can see an old electric mining locomotive, and trace many coal seams and tunnels into the inky blackness that hints at the extensive network below Scranton carved out by generations of miners. Mine tours are available Thursdays through Sundays between April and November. — *Brian Solomon*



The Lackawanna Coal Mine Tour is located on the west side of the city in McDade Park. Visitors are transported by a cable-hoisted railcar deep below ground through the rail-laid tunnels of an old anthracite coal mine. The walking tour lasts more than an hour.



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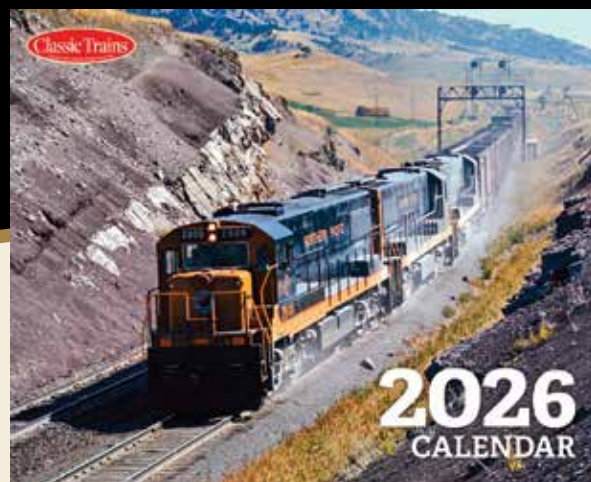
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RAIL SHOWS AND EVENTS

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In the December issue



Rare street running on the Susie-Q

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