

RAIL PASSENGERS
ASSOCIATION

FRIDAY HOTLINE

#1424

JANUARY 16TH, 2026



Tell Us Your Story

Association News

Passenger Rail Faces a Reckoning

[Editor's Note: Jim wrote this piece for our editorial partner [Streetsblog USA](#) this week; if you believe in our work, you'll love Streetsblog, which deserves your support.]

[by Jim Mathews / President & CEO](#)

If December is a time for taking stock and taking a break, then January is often a time for realism and resolve. And this January is turning out to have even sharper edges than usual.

That's because decisions being made in the first ninety days of 2026 in three different areas really could change everything we know about passenger rail in America.

A mega-merger with massive implications for passenger rail

Let's start with the biggest issue on the horizon: [the proposed merger of Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern](#). Yes, the ultimate decision is about a year away. But sides are lining up for and against, and right now, the Surface Transportation Board, which is colloquially known as STB -- the railroads' economic regulator -- is considering the details of how the rules governing that decision will be applied. From outside the formal proceeding, meanwhile, [vested interests are already trying to find ways to put their thumbs on the scale in advance](#).

Mergers come and go. But this one is really, truly different. [Together, UP and NS currently host 25 of Amtrak's 44 state-supported and long-distance routes – fifty-seven percent of the entire national network](#). Those lines carried more than 11 million passengers in 2024. That's almost two-thirds of all Amtrak riders outside the Northeast Corridor.

The harsh truth is that if you care about Amtrak trains running on time, going where you want to go, and adding the service that you need, a combined UP-NS will effectively have veto power over all of that. We will be living in the world that UP-NS creates — and doing so on their terms.

And it's not just today's trains that hang in the balance. Of the 69 corridors selected by the Federal Railroad Administration for development, 33 would operate partly or entirely on UP or NS tracks. That's nearly half of the future passenger rail network in this country potentially controlled by a single company.

Union Pacific's initial application filing with the STB isn't encouraging. When it comes to passenger trains, [there's an almost boilerplate, cut-and-paste repetition of the phrase "maintaining current passenger service levels."](#) Even the most optimistic reading suggests, at best, that would mean maintaining today's substandard status quo for passenger-rail service. A more pragmatic reading looks even worse.

Congress explicitly rejected the passenger-rail status quo in 2021 when it wrote the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, kicking off expansion plans with serious, multi-year funding. And Congress may hold the answer here again: in October, Senators John Hoeven (R-N.D.) and Amy Klobuchar (D-

Minn.) [led a bipartisan letter to the STB](#) along with 16 of their colleagues signaling that they want to see much more than just a rubber stamp applied to this merger.

As I often counsel transit and rail advocates, the message to your elected representatives is pretty simple: "I live here, I vote here, and this is important to me." No matter where you live, you can ask your Senator to look skeptically and critically at this transaction, but that carries a bit more weight if you're represented by one of the Senators who signed this letter.

That includes Republicans like Tim Sheehy of Montana, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, long-distance trains stalwart Steve Daines of Montana, Roger Marshall of Kansas, South Dakota's Mike Rounds, Mississippi's Roger Wicker (another Amtrak stalwart), Jim Banks from Indiana, and Iowa's Joni Ernst. Apart from Klobuchar, the Democrats include New Mexico's Martin Heinrich, Tina Smith from Minnesota, Raphael Warnock from Georgia, Senate Commerce Ranking Member Patty Murray of Washington, Arizona's Ruben Gallego, Tammy Baldwin from Wisconsin, Illinois' Tammy Duckworth, and Senate Minority Whip Dick Durbin, also from Illinois.

Richard Kloster, a long-time railroad consultant, is the White House's pick for the empty spot on the STB and he faced a confirmation hearing last month in the Senate. [He has not yet been confirmed](#), and under Senate rules any Senator -- including those who signed the letter -- can put a hold on a nomination.

A bruising budget battle on the horizon

Congress faces an even more immediate issue right now, however: the possibility of yet another government shutdown at the end of this month.

Work is happening this week on a so-called "mini-bus," jargon congressional slang for a catch-all appropriations bill that excludes a few items (unlike an omnibus whose name suggests, with 'omni,' that it includes everything). The debate now is whether Homeland Security funding is in or out of the mini-bus, and Democratic appropriators are adamant that Homeland Security appropriations stand on their own.

Both Republicans and Democrats emerged bruised and bloody from last fall's record shutdown — and when I talk with folks here in DC, there isn't much appetite to go through that again. On the other hand, there's not a lot of agreement on how to move forward on appropriations for various functions, even in a temporary way through something called a "continuing resolution" (which effectively keeps the lights on at present levels until a regular funding bill gets passed.)

A shutdown would once again freeze federal grant programs, delay crucial environmental and permitting reviews, stall construction seasons, and disrupt the very agencies responsible for passenger rail safety and development. Corridor Identification program work, Fed-State Partnership grants — all of it could grind to a halt. Even a couple of weeks' delay could ripple through and lose passenger-rail another year of important progress.

And as we all know, infrastructure we build today is always cheaper than what we build tomorrow. Delays intrinsically cost money.

Reauthorization, reauthorization, reauthorization

The third area for advocates to watch, of course, is the work to replace the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

House Transportation and Infrastructure Chair Sam Graves (R-Mo.) has already said he wants to get a new five-year authorization done by May. This week he said work on it could start as soon as next week. But he's also said he wants it to be a "[traditional highway bill](#)," which would unwind more than a decade's worth of progress in investing in rail and transit at the Federal level.

Now yes, it's true: this particular Congress enjoys a productivity record unblemished by success, and the likelihood of an actual surface bill making it through both the House and Senate and to President Trump's desk before election season kicks off is pretty low. But it's not zero. And if we want to keep the momentum going for rail and transit progress in this country, once again you'll have to call your member of Congress and let them know you want more than just a "Pave, Baby, Pave" five-year policy bill.

Of course, a whole new Congress could emerge after November's elections. As an advocate, your message to your candidates should make it clear what you care about and what shapes your vote. That might not be a bad way to get the IIJA replacement bill we all want, need, and deserve.

Field Notes

New Zealand's "Mainlander" to Open on South Island on January 20

Long distance passenger service will return to New Zealand's South Island for the first time since 2002 when the *Mainlander* begins service on January 20.

The train journeys will be luxury services aimed at tourists. The *Mainlander* is owned and operated by Rail and Tourism Group, a private company in New Zealand. The rail service will begin January 20 - 23 to coincide with the school holidays. The inaugural trip will be broken down into three sections, Christchurch to Dunedin on day one, Dunedin to Invercargill on day two, then back to Dunedin for a return to Christchurch on January 23. Services will remain monthly until more frequent schedules will be offered later this year, probably with a weekly Friday - Sunday schedule.

Fares for the *Mainlander* reflect its luxurious service. A one way fare from Christchurch to Dunedin, a distance of 360 miles is \$149. The entire 4 day journey costs \$999 which includes three nights in hotels. All tickets for the first runs of the rail line in January have been sold.

Dave MacPherson, a spokesperson for Save Our Trains Southern calls the *Mainlander* a "good start," calling the new tourist rail line a "good recognition of the growing popularity, worldwide and in New Zealand, of passenger rail, but by no means addresses the need for trains that will serve our local communities." Currently, New Zealand's North Island has three passenger rail lines, while the South Island has no passenger rail service besides lines aimed at tourists.

Demand for passenger train service seems to be increasing in New Zealand, particularly on South Island. Plans continue to progress on the "Event Express" service by Mainland Rail. This would not be a regularly scheduled rail line, but passenger train service provided for major events like concerts or sporting events. The Event Express seems likely to begin service in April 2026 and would offer services to downtown Christchurch from suburbs like Rolleston and Rangiora.

Please email [Joe Aiello](#) if you have any local, state or regional stories/projects (even something you know or experienced happening overseas) that you would like to write about and see highlighted in the Hotline.

Calling All Readers!

Do you have a favorite transit/train photo (or photos) you have taken from your travels around the country, or even around the world? Would you like to see them featured in our Hotline social media post each week (with credit, of course)?

Send them to Joe Aiello @ jaiello@narprail.org with the subject "HOTLINE PHOTO"

Hotline Links

A curated selection of passenger rail and transportation stories from this week. Check out our social media feeds to read breaking news and join the conversation!

[Rail regulators accused of ignoring safety recommendations after shocking number of accidents](#), The Independent

A sobering look at rail safety: a new analysis from the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Maryland reveals that despite 3,000+ accidents over the last decade, many federal safety recommendations remain unimplemented

[American Freedom Train No. 1 unveiled after cosmetic restoration](#), Trains

After a long rehab project, in time for the US's 250th this year and the 200th anniversary of American railroads in 2027, the Baldwin Locomotive Works built American Freedom Train locomotive No. 1 (which led the Freedom Train for the bicentennial '76) was unveiled to the public at the B&O Railroad Museum in Baltimore.

[Florida's Tri-Rail sets ridership record in 2025](#), Progressive Railroading

Add one more all-time ridership record to the list

[Murphy, 13 Senators Call On Appropriations Leadership To Defend Funding For Northeast Corridor Development, Expanded Amtrak Lines Nationwide](#), Senator Chris Murphy

ICYMI: After House Republicans have proposed zeroing out the Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail grant program, Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) and a number of colleagues have jumped to its defense.

[**Save Almost 50%! USA Rail Pass for \\$250, Amtrak Media**](#)

To celebrate the country's 250th birthday, Amtrak's "USA Rail Pass" is currently on sale for \$250 until January 20th.

[**Amtrak, VRE scale back service to make way for Potomac River bridge construction, WIJA**](#)

To prepare for construction over the Potomac (part of the \$2.7B Long Bridge Project) that is expected to take four years to complete, both VRE and Amtrak will be adjusting schedules for those heading to and from the District.

[**\[VIDEO\] SEPTA resumes morning express service on Regional Rail after months of federally mandated delays. CBS News Philadelphia**](#)

Thanks to the equipment shortage caused by a mandatory federal inspection order of more than half SEPTA Regional Rail fleet, express trains have been operating as all-stop service. That finally ended on Monday.

[**Michigan north-south passenger rail line project seeking public feedback, WCMU**](#)

Passenger rail expansion could be coming to the Mitten. By using existing state-owned tracks, the North-South rail project aims to get cars off the road and boost local economies from Detroit to Petoskey.

[**MBTA shortlists three potential commuter rail operators, WBUR News**](#)

Late last month, the MTBA issued an RFP for the operation and maintenance of its commuter rail system (the 5th largest in the country). One of the three bids includes a partnership between Alstom and Keolis, who has been running the lines since 2014.

[**Rail unions to request 2nd Presidential Emergency Board that would further delay possible LIRR strike, Connecticut News 12**](#)

LIRR rail unions have formally requested a second Presidential Emergency Board (the first being last Sept), extending the no-strike period by another 120 days, potentially into midMay, while wage negotiations continue.

[**Service Outage Coming For AirTrain At Newark Airport: See Who Is Impacted, Patch - Newark**](#)

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has released plans for the next phase of the \$3.5B AirTrain renovation project - so give yourself a little extra time if you are flying out of Newark Airport.

[**Santa Barbara Metrolink proposal scrapped; Pacific Surfliner to provide new train service instead, Santa Barbara News Press**](#)

Backed by a \$27M federal grant to return service to pre-pandemic levels, proposed Metrolink service to Santa Barbara has been replaced by an expanded Pacific Surfliner plan.

[**Sound Transit seeks volunteers to serve on agency oversight panel, Sound Transit Media**](#)

Seattle's Sound Transit is looking for volunteers to serve on their oversight committee - including those with backgrounds in engagement, advocacy, and passenger experience.



**WE ARE WORKING ON A DISCORD SERVER.
STAY TUNED FOR MORE INFORMATION**

If you aren't following Rail Passengers on social media, you should be! We are covering all the breaking news America's passengers need to stay informed on local, regional, and national issues.

Upcoming Events

Advocacy Workshops + Council Business Meeting



2026 DC WORKSHOPS

+ Days on the Hill

April 20th - April 24th, 2026

Rail Passengers Office
1200 G St NW, Suite 520

DC ADVOCACY WORKSHOPS REGISTRATION

Registration is \$125.00

Due to the space limitations of our office, each of the sessions is **limited to 20 tickets** and there will be no on-site or virtual registration. Please attend the session for the state you reside in. **Registration ends at Midnight eastern on Friday, April 10th.**

The in-office workshops will run from 8:00a to 4:00p. Lunch will be provided (*attendees are responsible for their own breakfast*). Attendees will be responsible for securing their own lodging needs.

Stay tuned to www.railpassengers.org/dc2026 for more information.



2026 SPRING COUNCIL BUSINESS MEETING REGISTRATION

**In-person registration is \$99
Virtual registration is free**

The 2026 Spring Council Business Meeting will take place on Wednesday, April 22nd from 8:00a to 4:00p. Lunch will be provided (*attendees are responsible for their own breakfast*). Registration ends on Friday, April 10th at Midnight eastern. There will be no on-site registration.

Stay tuned to www.railpassengers.org/2026SpringCouncilMeeting for more information.

Please contact Joe Aiello (jaiello@narprail.org) to have a local, state or regional meeting added to the Rail Passengers calendar (print and on-line) of upcoming events!

Staff Updates

Your staff is at the table, in the field, having the conversations that make a difference for passengers across the country. Learn what they're up to each week and how you can support your Association's key missions!

- **Jim Mathews, President & CEO**, met extensively in DC this week with allies and passenger rail leaders as a crucial few months for passenger-rail take shape. He also spent time onboarding the first new group of volunteers to the Professional Staff.
- **Sean Jeans-Gail, Vice President of Policy**, talked with several recent volunteers to our new volunteer program before heading out of the office on scheduled leave.
- **Jonsie Stone, Chief of Staff**, is on leave this week.

- **Joe Aiello, Director of Community Engagement & Organizing**, met with our new graphic design volunteer, as well as potential partners for our meeting in Toledo this fall. He also continued to work on the ongoing Council election.
- **Kimberly Notarianni, Membership Management Consultant**, continues to work closely with our members to assist with account access, username retrieval, password resets, and the addition of sub-memberships for qualifying membership levels. Members with a Family membership or higher are reminded that each sub-member is assigned their own unique member ID number. The Head of Household's ID number is not a shared or blanket number and cannot be used on behalf of other family members. When booking Amtrak tickets, the 10% member discount will apply only to the individual whose unique ID number is entered, and will not be recognized for additional tickets booked under a different household member.

Apply for Volunteer Staff at Rail Passengers Association



[CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE!](#)

Membership How-To

Are you a current member and need help with your account number, username, etc.?

[Click Here For Our Membership "How-To" Page](#)

We Have Merch!

New items available!





Service Updates
& Timetables



Visit the General
Membership Group



View Webinars



Rail Passengers'
Social Media



Take Action

Rail Passengers Timetables



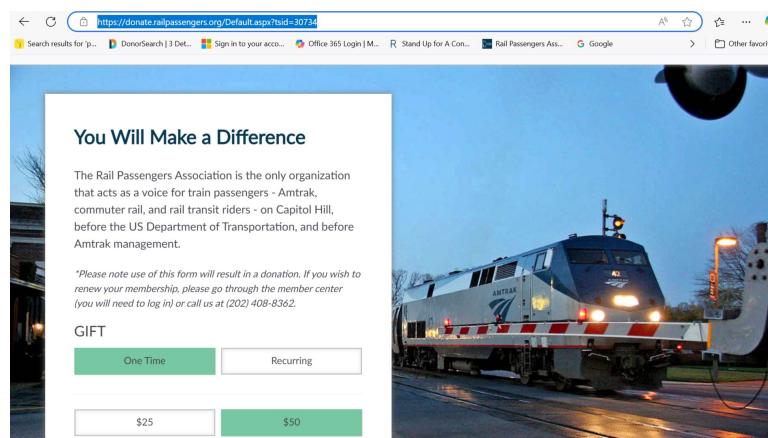
Thanks to a collaborative effort between Rail Passengers NYS Council Member Nathanael Nerode & [juckins.net](#)'s Chris Juckins, we have been able to completely update our timetables resource page.

[CLICK HERE](#)

NOTE: Because we do update the links on our website - please bookmark **the main page** and not the individual schedules

Donate Online with Confidence

You can donate to the Rail Passengers Association online with confidence, knowing your credit card information is secure. Charity Engine uses industry-standard SSL technology to keep your information secure. Don't wait for a paper appeal to donate, support the Association today by donating here. When the web browser shows a lock next to the URL, it means that it's an HTTPS, and it's secure:
<https://donate.railpassengers.org/Default.aspx?tsid=30734>



LOOKING FOR SMARTER



WAYS TO DONATE?



MAKING A CONTRIBUTION HAS NEVER BEEN EASIER!

Do more with your donations. If you have questions about employer match, gifting a membership, or other questions about how to make a bigger impact, let us know! Your staff is here to help with:

- Online Donations
- Donor Advised Funds
- Employer Match
- RPA Signature Visa Card
- Gift of Membership
- and More!

With multiple secure, protected methods of payment, you have more flexibility in the way dues are paid. Skip the hassle and [contact us](#) today for help setting up automatic or online payments.

- Setup ACH or E-Check with your bank of choice
- Use a Debit or Credit Card to pay online, or
- Send a check to 1200 G Street NW Suite 520 Washington, DC 20005

Use Your Donor Advised Fund (DAF) to Donate, Renew or Join Online

You can now donate or join/renew your membership, online, through your donor advised fund using DAFpay. All Rail Passengers forms now include a "Donor Advised Fund" button under Payment.

Donation Form:

Phone Number (not required)

Email Address

Yes, I would like to receive email communications.

PAYMENT

Credit Card Bank Account PayPal

Donor Advised Fund Google Pay

DAF pay | Donor Advised Fund

Dedicate this donation?



Membership Form:

Rail Passengers' Webinar Series

Other

Yes, I prefer communication by email rather than by mail.

PAYMENT

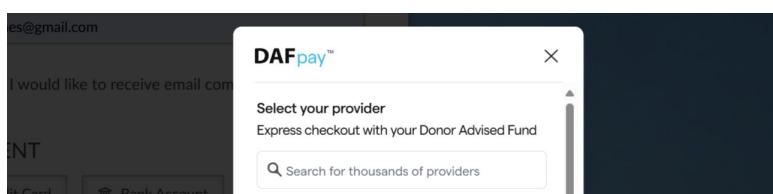
Credit Card Bank Account Donor Advised Fund Google Pay

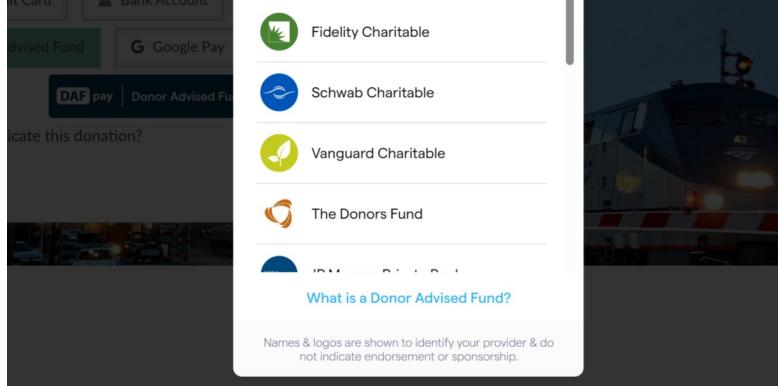
CAPTCHA

I'm not a robot reCAPTCHA Privacy - Terms

DAF pay | Donor Advised Fund

After selecting Donor Advised Fund as your payment preference, you will be taken to a DAFpay screen to select your donor advised fund provider, ie., Fidelity Charitable, Vanguard Charitable, Daffy, etc.





Select your provider, then follow their prompts. If you need to provide information on Rail Passengers Association, please use the below:

National Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc.
dba Rail Passengers Association
1200 G Street, NW
Suite 520
Washington, DC 20005
Contact: Jonsie Stone, jstone@narprail.org
Tax ID: 36-2615221

Member & Donor Notices

- **The Rail Passengers Association is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. Our federal tax identification number is 36-2615221**
- **To help facilitate dissemination of electronic thank you receipts, please make sure your contact information, specifically your email address, is up-to-date in your Neon profile.**
- **If you need assistance with your membership, please call the Office at 202-408-8362.**
- **While our staff continues to work remotely, we are unable to provide permanent membership cards. You can print a temporary membership card by creating an account at www.railpassengers.org (select "My Account" on the homepage).**
- **Complete all information! -- Before sealing your envelope, PLEASE double-check the credit card information on the buck slip!**
 - Print credit card information clearly.
 - **Include an expiration date, month and year, as well as the CVV number.**
 - Without **COMPLETE** information, your membership renewal or donation can't be processed.
- **If you have your financial institution send a check on your behalf, without a buckslip, PLEASE instruct them to add:**
 - a notation in the memo field if the payment is for membership dues or a donation, AND,
 - your Rail Passengers Association member ID. If we have multiple members with the same name, i.e., John Smith, it can be hard to identify the correct member to attribute the payment, without the member ID.



Rail Passengers Association members have access to a full service, nationwide federal credit union with extensive product and service offerings. Signature FCU is the exclusive provider of the [Rail Passengers Association-branded Visa credit card](#) with our logo, which supports our work by giving back to

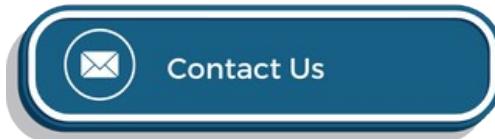


Rail Passengers Association Earns Coveted 4-Star Rating from Charity Navigator

our organization, and gives you 1 point for every \$1 you spend to redeem for travel and merchandise. The card has no annual fee, no balance transfer fees, no foreign transaction fees, and has a very low interest rate.

Rail Passengers Association's strong financial health and commitment to accountability and transparency have earned it a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, America's largest independent charity evaluator. Our Charity Navigator profile can be found by clicking [here](#).

If you have questions, feedback, or submissions for next week's hotline, send us your thoughts! Help us spread the word about your local, regional, and national passenger rail wins.



THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS:



RAIL PASSENGERS

EST. 1967

Rail Passengers Association
1200 G St. NW
Suite 520
Washington, DC 20005

P 202.408.8362
F 202.408.8287

www.railpassengers.org