



Photo Credit: Italo Perdomo



FRIDAY HOTLINE

#1444

JUNE 26TH, 2026



NOTE: There will be no Hotline next Friday (July 3rd) because the office will be closed in observance of the 4th of July holiday.

Association News

Wisconsin Takes a Long-Overdue Step Forward on Passenger Rail

by Sean Jeans-Gail | VP of Gov't Affairs + Policy

For the Rail Passengers Association and our members, [this week's announcement from Governor Tony Evers and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation \(WisDOT\)](#) represents something we have been working towards for more than a decade: a serious effort to reconnect Wisconsin's capital city—and the communities in between—to the national passenger rail network.

WisDOT's proposed plan would extend two daily Amtrak *Hiawatha* trains beyond Milwaukee to serve Pewaukee, Watertown, and Madison, linking Dane, Jefferson, and Waukesha counties directly with the Chicago hub. It is both a modest, incremental expansion of existing service and—simultaneously—a meaningful step toward reviving a project that should never have been killed in the first place.

Discussing this proposal requires acknowledging the lost opportunity of 2010. Wisconsin was awarded \$810 million in federal funding to develop higher-speed rail between Milwaukee and Madison—an investment that would have transformed mobility across the state. That funding was ultimately rejected by Republican Governor Scott Walker, who made killing the train a key part of his campaign for governor, using the project as a symbolic act of defiance against the Obama Administration. The decision killed more than the train, however, ultimately driving equipment manufacturer Talgo to shutter a Milwaukee-based intercity passenger rail manufacturing facility, while leaving Wisconsin's taxpayers on the hook for a \$50 million settlement for two trainsets that were originally intended for the service.

"The opportunity to expand passenger rail has haunted Wisconsin for a generation because of a short-sighted political stunt—that decision cost our state dearly, and we want to right that wrong," said Gov. Evers. "Ensuring Wisconsin has the 21st-century transportation and infrastructure we need to compete for workers and thrive in a 21st-century economy must be a top priority for our state, especially if we want to keep working toward the future we've been building together over the last seven years. This is an important effort that should have happened a long time ago, and I'm hopeful the Trump Administration will approve our request so we can get this done."

[Click Here To Read More](#)

Trojan Iron Horse

This article was originally published on our [Substack page](#) on 6/16

by Jim Mathews / President & CEO

Before I arrived at this Association 12 years ago, I was a newsman. By the time I left my former employers, I had written more than 45,000 articles of one sort or another (not my number, but calculated by a colleague who presented it with great fanfare and some amusement during my going-away

do). In other words, I spent three decades of my life supporting my family under the benevolent protection of the First Amendment. When it comes to free speech, I AM an absolutist.

Even so, I have to raise a few questions about the Big Boy locomotive celebration in Scranton, Penn., at the [Steamtown National Historic Site](#). See, Steamtown is operated by the National Park Service, an arm of the Federal government and supported through a mix of appropriated taxpayer dollars and fees for permits, parking, entrance, and the like. It's where Big Boy's other surviving (but not operating) sibling, 4012, has been restored for public viewing.

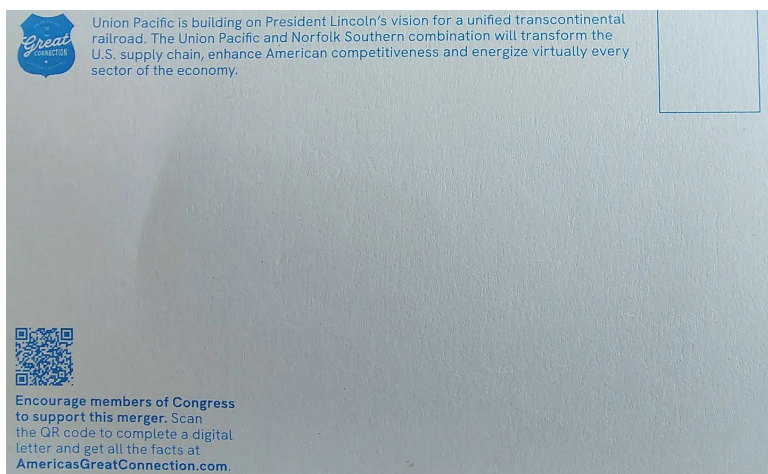
Naturally, as Union Pacific's Big Boy made its way from Omaha on to Norfolk Southern territory to wow the crowds in Ohio, New York State, and now in Pennsylvania, [the plan was to stage a "reunion" of the two massive machines](#).

So far, so cool.



They even handed out these retro-flavored postcards (see the picture above) as a commemorative keepsake. *Even cooler!*

But let's flip it over and see what's on the back.



Hoo boy.

This postcard explicitly says the UP–NS combination “will transform the U.S. supply chain” and asks visitors to “encourage members of Congress to support this merger.” Merger advocacy, not neutral commemoration. My wife, who some of you have met at our Association events from time to time, nailed it when we talked about the postcards this morning: “Trojan Iron Horse.” (Those of you who know her know that of the two of us she is superior in every respect, including headline-crafting.)

I'm not saying this was illegal, or against the rules. There are things I don't know about the specifics, so I don't have enough facts to draw that conclusion. But boy, do I sure have questions.

On one hand, as an arm of the Federal government the Park Service has to recognize and respect First Amendment activity on park land, including “distribution of printed matter,” “demonstrations,” and “speechmaking,” and [Steamtown's own permits page says such requests must be treated equally](#). Like nearly every other Federal venue, permits may regulate time, place, number, facilities, and equipment, but not the content of the message. That means the Park Service can't just say, “We dislike pro-merger advocacy, therefore no postcards.” In fact, I would have opposed that kind of content-based restriction if it had surfaced in advance.

But the Code of Federal Regulations is also pretty clear that commercial purposes have to be pretty limited. [36 CFR § 5.1](#) says commercial notices or advertisements may not be displayed, posted, or distributed on Federally

controlled park land unless the superintendent has given prior written permission. More important, that permission is limited to goods, services, or facilities available within the park and necessary or desirable for visitor convenience. Think "hot dog stand," or "rain ponchos."

The Park Service's [own advertising memo](#) reads that rule strictly and says Park Service or partner publications distributed in parks may not include advertisements for goods, services, or facilities outside park boundaries; it also warns against any kind of Park Service distribution that would look like endorsement.

If UP or NS employees privately handed these out in a designated area under a permit, National Park Service probably had to allow it on a viewpoint-neutral basis consistent with the First Amendment. Ugly? Yes. A publicity stunt? Absolutely. Illegal? Harder to say. Stranger things have happened lately...

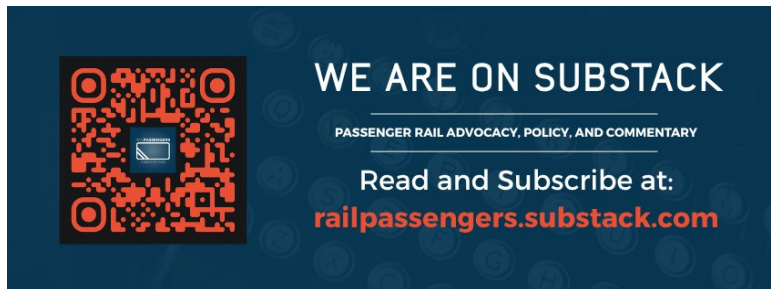
If these postcards were handed out as part of the official National Park Service-managed visitor experience, at Park Service entry points, in visitor-center space, by Park Service staff or volunteers, or under a special-event arrangement that didn't authorize advocacy material, then it becomes much more problematic.

At that point the question is not "may a private party advocate on federal land?" The question becomes "did the Park Service allow a corporate merger campaign to be embedded in an official NPS event, while using federal property and visitor flow to generate political support?"

So, here's what I'd really like to know: Was Union Pacific, Norfolk Southern, or any contractor or affiliate authorized to distribute merger-advocacy postcards or QR-code materials at Steamtown during the Big Boy 4014 visit? If so, under what authority: the special-event agreement, a First Amendment permit under 36 CFR §§ 2.51/2.52, written permission under 36 CFR § 5.1, or some other instrument?

Don't misunderstand me. Park Service property doesn't have to be entirely message-free. But the government can't turn a National Park site into a one-sided corporate advocacy platform while denying comparable access to the other side, especially given that the corporate advocacy concerns [a mega-merger under active review by Federal regulators](#).

If the millions of Americans who want, need, and deserve a modern, well-supported, and growing passenger-rail network wanted to distribute opposing or, at least, cautionary material to the general public -- say, at some kind of educational event -- would the Park Service or Steamtown provide the same website presence, physical access, locations, timing, and visitor-facing opportunity?



WE ARE ON SUBSTACK
PASSENGER RAIL ADVOCACY, POLICY, AND COMMENTARY
Read and Subscribe at:
railpassengers.substack.com

Giving you new opportunities to interact with us. Read, comment, and chat! We are working on adding new contributors to write exclusive blogs for the site and throwing around ideas for more content (podcast, anyone?)

[Check It Out Here!](#)

Field Notes

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)?

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!

[Opinion: Amtrak needs to plug hole in its fleet replacement plan](#),
Trains

ICYMI: Rail Passengers President & CEO Jim Mathews follows up on a long-distance fleet blog post he wrote back in May on our site with this opinion piece for Trains Pro over the weekend.

[Proposed Bedford rail station on track to boost local economy, tourism](#), **WFXR**

Bedford (VA) wants in on the passenger rail action as a stop along the Northeast Regional line to Roanoke, and they have the data to back it up.

[Amtrak calls for MTA to partner on the Penn Station rebuild it once led](#) - **Gothamist**

Amtrak wants the MTA back at the table for the estimated \$7B project.

[LIRR, Metra workers ratify contracts with BLET](#), **Progressive Railroading**

Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLET) members have ratified two contract agreements in the last week - the first being the deal that ended the 3-day LIRR strike back in May, and the other is a new long-term deal with Chicago's Metra.

[Alstom to sponsor Pullman Railroad Days](#), **Trains**

Next month's Railroad Days will also celebrate the 100th anniversary of the electrification of the Illinois Central Railroad's commuter rail and will feature the last surviving Pullman-built cars for that service from 1926.

[Amtrak station in Saratoga Springs is on track for accessibility upgrades](#), **North Country Public Radio**

The new, completely ADA-compliant station should be done by next summer.

[Skunk Train Unveils its Tribute to America's 250th Anniversary—Locomotive 1776](#), **Business Wire**

The Mendocino Railway's "Skunk Train" is celebrating America's 250th with the reveal of Locomotive 1776

[As fans flock to SoFi and watch parties, Metro ridership gets major boost during World Cup](#), **LAist**

Public transportation was very much at the forefront of World Cup conversation before the matches began - and it seems that fans have been flocking to the various modes around the country

[Littleton mayor voices support for Front Range Passenger Rail](#), **Littleton Independent**

Littleton, CO is all-in on CoCo.

[Public transport strike from 4 a.m. to 8 a.m.: No trains, buses, trams, metros running](#), **NL Times**

Public transportation in the US often gets (fairly or not) compared to systems around the world. While worker strikes do happen here, it is a rarer occurrence than it is in other countries.



**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

Association Events



We are excited to announce some of the incredible lineup of guest speakers for RailNation: Toledo!

Join us as we dive into advocacy, local collaboration, and the future of passenger rail. We are thrilled to welcome:

- Rail Passengers' VP of Government Affairs Sean Jeans-Gail and Data Analysis Lead John Christoph;
- Toledo Mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz and Austin Mack, Legislative and Public Affairs Manager for the Toledo Mayor's Office;
- All Aboard Ohio Chair Mitch Radakovich and Lead Communications Strategist Ryan Pecaut;
- Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission Executive Director William Murdock;
- Mark Brazeau, Director of Group Sales and Relationship Management for Destination Toledo

We look forward to announcing other distinguished leaders in the industry as we get closer to the event!

Will we see you there?

[Click Here For The RailNation Website](#)

Local Meetings + Events

[Greater Northwest Rail Summit](#), August 25-27

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

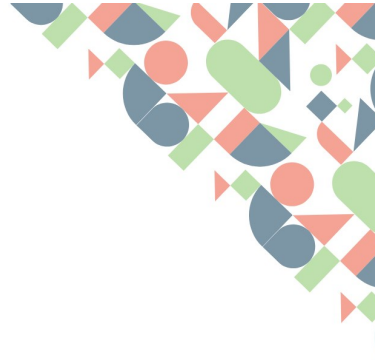
Your staff is at the table, in the field, having the conversations that make a difference for passengers across the country. Learn what they're up to each week and how you can support your Association's key missions!

- **Jim Mathews, President & CEO**, worked on further research as the Association prepares its responses to the Union Pacific-Norfolk Southern merger case at the Surface Transportation Board, got a briefing on Amtrak plans for major work just south of DC's Union Station, and did a podcast interview with Bill Moyer on Reconnect America.
- **Sean Jeans-Gail, Vice President of Policy**, tracked nomination action in the Senate, worked with coalition partners on understanding how the upcoming midterms will influence transportation policy – in both the current and next Congress – while working with Amtrak to understand recent service changes and infrastructure delivery plans.
- **Jonsie Stone, Chief of Staff**, worked with our auditing partners on the 2025 financial statements and 990, processed membership dues and donations sent directly to the DC office, collaborated with our partners in Ohio on RailNation and tended to the operational/administrative needs of the Association.
- **Joe Aiello, Director of Community Engagement & Organizing**, spent the week tending to a number of internal Association issues and continued work on the upcoming fall meeting.
- **Kimberly Notarianni, Membership Management Consultant**, continues to assist Rail Passengers Association members with password resets, linking sub-members to household memberships, processing new

and renewal memberships, and helping members enter their RPA Membership ID into their Amtrak Guest Rewards profile to receive eligible benefits. If you need assistance with adding your RPA Membership ID to your Amtrak account, be sure to check out our helpful step-by-step guide here: <https://www.railpassengers.org/all-aboard/join/how-to/#Amtrak>. As always, if you have questions or need assistance with your membership, we're here to help!

Apply for Volunteer Staff at Rail Passengers Association

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NEEDED**



railpassengers.org/volunteer

Rail Passengers Association

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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!



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Discuss This
Week's Hotline



Service Updates
& Timetables



Visit the General
Membership Group



View Webinars



Rail Passengers'
Social Media


Take Action

Rail Passengers Timetables



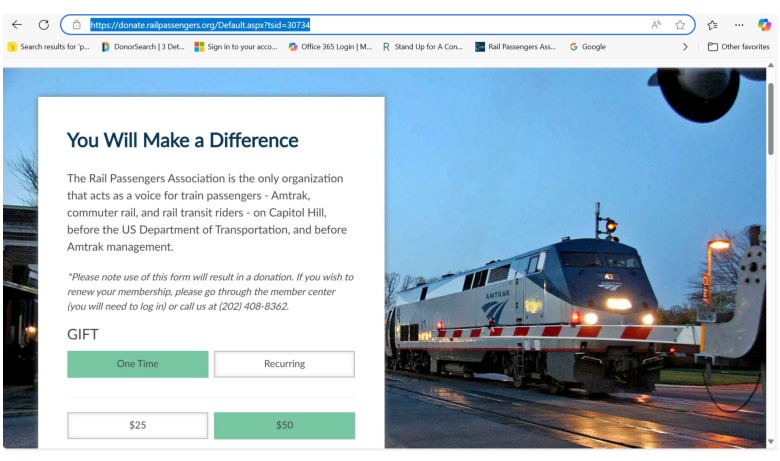
Our Timetables Manager, Chris Jukins, has created a spring update for us. He is still working on a few stragglers, but we should have those up soon.

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

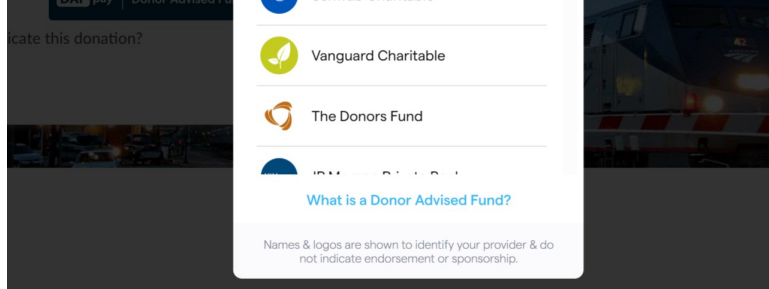
Use Your Donor Advised Fund (DAF) to Donate, Renew or Join Online

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:

Membership Form:

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 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.



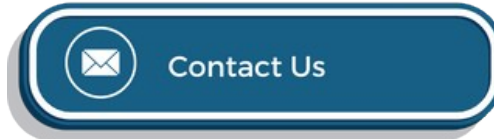
Rail Passengers Association Earns 3-Star Rating from Charity Navigator

Rail Passengers Association's strong financial health and commitment to accountability and transparency have earned it a 3-star rating from Charity Navigator, America's largest independent charity evaluator. Our Charity Navigator profile can be found by clicking [here](#).

THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS:



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.



RAIL PASSENGERS

EST. 1967

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