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## Amtrak Is Better Than Flying

Passenger Rail In The Northeast Corridor Is Exceptional

By [William Lyons](#) | Apr 24, 2016

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**William Lyons**

For all of the many issues that hamper Amtrak's financial success, the experience of taking the Acela to New York or Philadelphia is truly exceptional. The service they provide is outstanding, and for short trips in the northeast corridor, the difference in travel time as compared to taking a flight is minimal. Unfortunately, our federal government prevents this from being an even better service through burdensome legislation. It is high time for Congress to create a legislative framework that will allow for more successful high speed passenger rail service, not only in the northeast corridor, but throughout the country.

This past Monday, I took the Acela express from Westwood Station to Philadelphia's 30th Street station to attend an Urban Land Institute conference. The train was clean and pleasant. I was able to get up and go to

the café car. My colleague and I had a table and were able to get some significant work accomplished while on the trip. Best of all, the business class seats were very comfortable and we did not have to contend with the arm rest encroachment so prevalent on flights these days.

The cost of the fare was also very reasonable. The round trip fare was only \$332, quite comparable to a roundtrip airfare. With a travel time of just under five hours, the trip takes a little longer than a flight from Logan Airport, especially when you factor in being at the airport an hour before the flight and then needing to claim your luggage at your destination. The additional time is well worth having a far more comfortable and productive trip.

As a transportation planner and engineer, I find this mode of transportation to be far more interesting as well. It is somehow still exciting to take a long train ride and watch the scenes rush by on the trip. While many people don't give rail travel a thought, I think it is hands down a better way to travel if one can spare the extra travel time.

The quality of this trip leads me to wonder why this service cannot be more successful. Amtrak's northeast corridor operations, running between Boston and Washington, D.C., operate at a profit. Only recently, Congress allowed Amtrak to spend profits raised on the northeast corridor on infrastructure in the northeast corridor.

Unlike other transportation modes, passenger railroad capital improvements do not have a dedicated source of revenue for capital improvements. For instance, highway and transit systems are supported by national and state fuels taxes. Airline terminals and airports are supported by passenger taxes and fees. Our passenger rail systems do not have a comparable source of revenue, so they rely on fares to support capital investments. However, the reality is that fares cannot be increased to cover the cost of such capital improvements without becoming uncompetitive and causing a loss of ridership. This is a serious dilemma.

### **Congressional Debate**

To make matters worse, the funding Amtrak does receive from Congress is very inconsistent and must be debated every time an appropriation is required. For instance, Congress cut Amtrak's funding in 2015, demanding that the service manage its resources better. While it should always be the goal of government agencies to manage their fiscal resources better, it is not helpful to cut funds necessary to make capital investments, as this only results in more repair costs.

It is no secret that Republicans in Congress are generally hostile to Amtrak's existence. This hostility is rooted in a general desire to eliminate federal government participation in all but the most essential transportation functions, and have the states and private industry be responsible for all other transportation systems. Like the interstate highway system, the federal government has a significant role to play in ensuring that our transportation system is able to serve the needs of an America increasingly reliant on transportation systems to serve as the lifeblood of the economy. Congress' approach is unfortunate, and does not recognize the role the federal government must play in interstate and intercity travel. For the time being, this is the reality that Amtrak must face.

In order to make sure that our passenger rail system is viable for the foreseeable future (and that I can take pleasant train rides to New York and Philadelphia!), it seems that Congress should create a passenger rail trust fund, much like the surface transportation trust funds, to provide a necessary source of capital for capital investments. This would take the politics out of recurring appropriations from the general fund by Congress. And it might just lead to a world class passenger rail system, with high speed rail between economic centers. Such an investment might actually allow us to compete with other major global economies, all of which are

making these types of investments regularly. Now that would truly be a giant step forward for America.

Meanwhile, I will look forward to my return trip to Boston.

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