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\$ 200M For Rail An Investment

Most of us are at least dimly aware of that long sleek passenger train that stops in Albuquerque twice a day and is not the Rail Runner. This train is Amtrak's Chicago-Los Angeles Southwest Chief, a surviving remnant of our once-near-complete passenger Rail network.

This "remnant" is pretty popular: over 355,000 boardings and alightings in FFY 2012, roughly a third in New Mexico. It's also in trouble. The tracks from Newton KS to Lamy NM, while still safe enough, are getting a little rough and ragged. The BNSF Railway, which owns these tracks, sees no compelling reason to keep the tracks up to passenger Rail speed standards (80 mph) because their freight trains don't travel that fast, nor require as smooth a ride. So the Chief is getting slower.

More alarming is that at the end of 2015, the existing basic maintenance contract between the BNSF and Amtrak is due to expire, meaning that one of several things will occur:

- 1) Said contract will be "inked" in 2014 and renewed in 2016;
- 2) The Chief will keep running slower and slower and begin losing ridership;
- 3) The Chief will be re-routed from Newton-Lamy to Wichita-Woodward OK, Amarillo, Clovis and Belen, possibly complicating access to Albuquerque;
- 4) The Chief will be killed entirely or perhaps become two shorter trains with a long bus connection.

Why should you care?

— Primarily because the Chief is a passenger train. All modern trains, freight or passenger, lead the motorized transportation pack in fuel / energy economy, long

vehicle life, long infrastructure life, all-weather efficiency, safety, economic development, public popularity and any other yardstick by which you measure good transportation.

— The Chief carries its numerous passengers not only between LA and Chicago, but between any and all city combinations along its route (over 2200 miles). In other words, the Chief is an excursion, long-distance, luxury, economy, regional and commuter train all rolled into one.

— The Chief is an excellent job-and-revenue-generating way to keep our under-used tracks warm till visionary future leaders wake up and take steps to make those tracks (especially the New Mexico segment) carry a lot more than two “lousy” trains a day.

Big Bucks Or Chicken Feed?

The amount of money required to upgrade the Newton-Lamy track segment (636 route miles) to 80 mph standards, and to maintain it to such standards for ten years, is about \$200 million or maybe less. This sounds like a lot, but under a current proposal, this money would be allocated at 10% per year, split among the BNSF Railway, Amtrak, Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico. This works out to about \$4 million per year per stakeholder; chicken feed when you consider the many benefits of passenger Rail and the dollars we routinely shell out for our continuous street and highway improvements.

Although this funding should be a federal responsibility (after all, the Chief is an interstate operation), most advocates will be happy to see the Chief continued, preferably on its present route, wherever the money comes from. The Chief, and especially its tracks, are among the best investments anybody can make in transportation—except of course, more bike and foot paths.

What about the Wichita-Amarillo-Clovis route? Simple. It should have a train too. We should not have to choose between these two possible alignments. Although we

prefer that the Chief not get re-routed, the more southerly route should also be served (as it once was) by passenger Rail—Amtrak or somebody else.

The American economy is supposedly driven by Supply and Demand. Rail passenger ridership, like rail freight tonnage, keeps increasing. The Demand is growing. The Supply is not. That \$200 million is not a cost; it's a very wise long-term investment.

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