May 2012

Background:

As you may have heard, the present alignment of the SW Chief is not assured beyond the next couple of years. At risk is the segment that runs from Newton, KS to Lamy, NM (636 track miles). The BNSF Railway, which owns these tracks, does not need to operate on this route (when they do at all) faster than 45 mph. This means they don't have to keep the tracks up to the 80+ mph standard desired by Amtrak for passenger trains. Which in turn means that the SW Chief is slowly getting slower and slower.

Somebody needs to come up with about $ 100 million to restore the track to 80 mph ("Class 4")standards and a few more million a year to keep them that way. I say a few more because rails last a lot longer and require much less repair than do roads and highways.

Since this track segment is presently used for very little besides two SW Chief trains a day, a lot of sensible people (and their political leaders) might reasonably wonder, why the hell spend this kind of money just to keep two trains a day running —- especially since an alternate route through Wichita, Northwest Oklahoma, Amarillo, Eastern NM and Belen will be available for rerouting the Chief should the need arise.

Besides the fact that the Chief is an all-important transportation resource to the three states in question, Rails Inc feels that those tracks are a very attractive resource for anybody — private or public — who owns and is willing to upgrade them and who can imagine more than a couple of years (or an election cycle) into the future.

Here's what we mean:

(Adapted From the Rail Users' Network National Newsletter, Spring 2012):

Several cities and towns along the (Newton KS-Lamy NM) route have passed and are passing resolutions supporting their desire to keep the Chief running where it is, citing the many benefits the train confers on their communities. A New Mexico branch of the SW Chief Coalition (based in La Junta CO) is putting itself together. The purchase by the State of New Mexico from the BNSF of the Raton Pass-Lamy track segment is still in limbo, where it has resided since the Martinez administration took over.

While we don't believe the tracks are in danger of being torn up and scrapped (although this is a possibility), Rails Inc feels that to save the Chief we need to save the tracks, and to save the tracks we need to demonstrate what a great asset they are. So "with a little help from our friends", we've compiled a **list of uses for these tracks** — beyond the important function of hosting two Amtrak trains a day.

Those two daily SW Chief trains by themselves justify the existence and improvement these tracks are in need of, but they certainly don't constitute full and efficient use of the route. We think it will be hard to secure the future of this route without convincing potential funders and owners—private or public—that these tracks could (and should) be busy more or less full-time.

So What Are Those Tracks Good For?

1) Hosting the SW Chief, of course.

2) Hosting future Amtrak Superliner (or similar) service from El Paso to Denver and points North, via Albuquerque, Raton and Pueblo (see our "Rocky Mountain Flyer" material at www.nmrails.org or Rail magazine, #25).

3) Establishment or expansion of commuter and regional Rail in the three affected states.

4) Restoration of rail freight and express. The costs of fuel, tires and asphalt are not dropping. Private haulers, short lines and entrepreneurs might find this an

acceptable risk if they don’t have to buy and own the tracks. Truckers don’t have to own the roads they run on.

5) Excursion trains, both modern and vintage. Besides their educational and cultural value, they can make pretty good money.

6) Hosting the field testing of new Rail safety components and other Rail products.

7) Hosting BNSF trains again, if anything happens to the Transcon.

8) **Not to forget:** Promoting the increased economic development, core-city renewal and tourism (with their considerable employment and tax revenues) that improved Rail transportation always pulls in.

It has also been suggested to us that advocates should compile a list of potential users of these tracks (towns, cities, schools, ranches, tourist attractions, transportation companies, excursion trains, etc) and ask them how permanent and reliable access to said tracks might improve or expand their operations. From this, revenue estimates might be put together to increase the attractiveness of the segment to either private or public potential ownership.

In the short haul, like seeds and range land, we need to “bank” these tracks till we can put them to the full use they deserve. If we’re short-sighted enough to let them go, it’ll be like the late 40’s all over again. Conventional, High Speed or Mag Lev, the future of this right of way should always be Rail.

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