



Amtrak Cascades Service Update

Status Report to the Transportation Committees
of the Washington State Legislature and
the Office of Financial Management

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Amtrak Cascades service update

This report provides a summary of activities the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) has undertaken in 2024 to drive improvements to Amtrak Cascades intercity passenger rail service in the Pacific Northwest. This summary is provided to comply with ESHB 2134, Section 223(4) that directs WSDOT to provide a status report to the transportation committees of the Legislature and the Office of Financial Management by December 1, 2024.

Amtrak Cascades background

Amtrak Cascades is an intercity passenger rail service that operates between Vancouver, B.C. and Eugene, Oregon. The service is jointly funded and managed by WSDOT and the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT). WSDOT oversees the portion of the Amtrak Cascades corridor between Vancouver, B.C. and Portland, Oregon, while ODOT has primary responsibility for service between Portland and Eugene. WSDOT and ODOT pay Amtrak to provide all aspects of the service.

Amtrak Cascades operates on privately owned tracks; BNSF owns the tracks in Washington and British Columbia, Sound Transit owns a short section of tracks between Tacoma and Nisqually, and Union Pacific owns the tracks in Oregon. Dispatching services are provided by BNSF in Washington, Union Pacific in Oregon and Canadian National in British Columbia. Stations along the Amtrak Cascades route are owned by a variety of entities, including WSDOT, cities, transit agencies, and railroads.

2024 Amtrak Cascades operations performance

During the pandemic, ridership and revenue on Amtrak Cascades decreased by 79% from 2019 levels. Ridership dropped to just 172,000 passengers in 2020, compared to 829,000 passengers in 2019. Ticket revenue decreased from \$33.2 million in 2019 to \$6.5 million in 2020. Since that time, ridership and revenue levels steadily recovered and in 2024 are expected to exceed pre-pandemic levels.

In December 2023, WSDOT and Amtrak added two additional daily roundtrips between Seattle and Portland. These trains supplement the four daily roundtrips between Seattle and Portland already in operation, and the two daily roundtrips between Portland and Eugene, and the two daily roundtrips between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. The two new daily roundtrip trains are the primary reason ridership and revenues surged in 2024.

Ridership: From January through September 2024, Amtrak Cascades trains carried 739,000 passengers, a 36% increase over same period in 2023.

Revenue: Between January and September 2024, ticket and other revenues rose to \$31.3 million, a 31% increase over same period in 2023.

On-time performance: Between January and October 2024, only 48.2% of all trains arrived at their final destination within 10 minutes of their scheduled arrival time, well below the goal of

88%. The primary causes of delays were freight train and passenger train interference, and speed restrictions imposed by host railroads Union Pacific, BNSF, and Canadian National.

Customer satisfaction: As measured by Amtrak customer surveys, Amtrak Cascades scored 74.7 out of 100 points from November 2023 through September 2024. Factors that affected customer satisfaction included multiple delays and service disruptions caused by landslides in Clark County early in the year, and problems with air conditioning systems on many older train cars during the summer months. The area prone to landslides in Clark County was hardened by BNSF in spring 2024, and air conditioning systems were closely monitored and repaired as soon as possible when failures occurred.

Youth Fare Program: The new Amtrak Cascades Youth Fare Program, which allows riders 18 years old and younger to ride Amtrak Cascades at no cost between Bellingham and Vancouver, WA started in late May 2024. Between May and the end of September, more than 15,000 young riders took advantage of this program, the only such program in Amtrak's national rail network, at an estimated cost of approximately \$442,000 in reduced revenue.

WSDOT planning activities – the Federal Railroad Administration's Corridor Identification and Development Program

The Amtrak Cascades rail corridor was accepted into the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) Corridor Identification and Development (Corridor ID) Program in December 2023. The FRA's new planning-to-construction program identifies and prioritizes federal funding for a pipeline of construction projects along the Amtrak Cascades corridor. Using FRA funding, WSDOT is currently scoping a Service Development Plan for capital and operational investments to improve Amtrak Cascades intercity passenger rail service from Portland, Oregon to Vancouver, British Columbia. This plan will serve as a blueprint for enhancements to Amtrak Cascades over the next 20 years.

WSDOT will advance into the planning phase of the Corridor ID Program in early 2025 and will begin work on key tasks that require corridor-wide collaboration, including market analysis, agency and public outreach and coordination, station area and access analyses, environmental planning and governance. The Service Development Plan also will include a list of specific railroad construction projects that will increase rail corridor capacity, fluidity, and allow for additional daily service levels over the next two decades.

Leveraging federal funds to improve Amtrak Cascades

Landslide mitigation: WSDOT and BNSF Railway were awarded three separate federal Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grants in 2017, 2019 and 2021 to reduce the risk of landslides at landslide-prone sites along railroad tracks between Seattle and Everett. WSDOT leveraged \$4.5 million in state funds into more than \$12 million (the total with BNSF, WSDOT, and FRA was over \$18M at 25, 25, and 50% of the total) total project funding through federal grants and BNSF Railway contributions. This route is used by daily Amtrak Cascades trains, as well as freight and commuter trains. Landslides that reach the tracks automatically trigger a 48-hour moratorium for passenger trains, leading to

significant disruptions to Amtrak Cascades service. Projects funded with the 2017 grant were completed in 2024. Projects identified for the 2019 grant will be constructed in 2025 to address landslide hazards at five additional locations. Agreements are currently being negotiated for projects that will be funded using the 2021 grant. Work includes constructing walls to stop debris from reaching tracks, enhancing slope stability, making drainage improvements, and adding slide warning fences. No landslides have reached the tracks or disrupted service in the locations where work was completed.

Salmon Bay Bridge: In 2022, WSDOT was awarded a \$25 million federal Infrastructure for Rebuilding America (INFRA) grant to rehabilitate the Salmon Bay Bridge, north of Seattle over the Ballard locks. BNSF Railway is funding the remainder of the \$110 million project. Rehabilitation of the movable span on the 100-year-old Salmon Bay Bridge will include replacing the counterweight, the counterweight truss, six of the eight bearings, and the counterweight links with steel members with a high resistance to fatigue. This bridge carries some 35 passenger and freight trains each day, as well as opening and closing for marine traffic traveling between Puget Sound and Lake Union. Diagnostics indicate that the system that allows the bridge to open and close is starting to fail. This threatens the movement of both rail and marine traffic through busy corridors and makes improvements critical for ongoing use. Planning and design for this rehabilitation were undertaken during 2024, and construction is expected to begin in 2025.

Upgrading rail switches and heaters: WSDOT was awarded a \$6.45 million FRA Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement (CRISI) grant in October 2024. The *Puget Sound Rail Corridor Improvement Project* funded through this grant includes an additional \$3.22 million contribution from WSDOT and \$3.22 million from BNSF Railway, for a total project budget of \$12.9 million. The project will improve rail corridor resiliency by replacing several railroad switches and adding switch heaters between Mukilteo and Vancouver, Washington. The new switches will be easier and faster to maintain, reducing delays to passenger and freight trains. The switch heaters will eliminate the need to manually clear switches of snow and ice during winter storms, which will help keep passenger and freight trains moving with fewer delays. BNSF will lead the environmental review and construction activities, with an anticipated completion date of winter 2028.

New trains, locomotives, and maintenance facility: The federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021 is providing Amtrak with nearly \$500 million to improve Amtrak Cascades service. These funds are being used to build and deliver eight new state-of-the-art trainsets for Amtrak Cascades, as well as a new maintenance facility in Seattle specifically designed to accommodate the new trainsets. These projects are fully funded with federal dollars.

- **New Amtrak Cascades equipment:** Eight new Amtrak Cascades trainsets and two new locomotives are currently being constructed in Sacramento, California. WSDOT is closely monitoring the production schedule and is in regular communication with the Amtrak national procurement team. These trainsets and locomotives will be the first delivered to a state-supported route, with the other 75 trainsets that are part of the

procurement going to routes along Amtrak's Northeast Corridor. The Amtrak Cascades trainsets are scheduled to go into service between Eugene, Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver, B.C. in 2026.

- **New Seattle Yard Maintenance Facility:** The groundbreaking for the new Seattle Yard Maintenance Facility will occur in early December 2024. The new facility will include a large servicing building that can hold up to two trainsets at one time, additional yard tracks, and a new parking structure and warehouse. This new facility is scheduled to become operational in late 2026.

Upgrades to Pacific Central Station in Vancouver, B.C.

Pacific Central Station in Vancouver, B.C. is the third busiest train station on the Amtrak Cascades corridor. In 2024, station owner VIA Rail Canada and Amtrak completed final designs to modify the joint U.S./Canada border agencies' passenger inspection area, with construction scheduled to commence in January 2025. Once completed in early summer 2025, Amtrak Cascades trains returning to the U.S. will no longer stop at the international border for secondary inspections by U.S. Customs and Border Patrol officers. This will reduce the travel time between Vancouver, B.C. and Seattle by 10 minutes. In 2024, WSDOT and Amtrak began providing information and educational materials to Canadian public agencies and others regarding Washington State and U.S. federal funding constraints for railroad-related capital projects in British Columbia that could support Amtrak Cascades service. Station platform upgrades are needed at Pacific Central Station to improve the boarding and de-boarding of the trains by passengers and, specifically, the disabled community. To make these platform improvements, a Canadian funding source will be necessary. To support information sharing and coordination, a new Cascades Gateway Bi-National Rail Working Group (Cascades Gateway Working Group) is being formed with the Pacific Northwest Economic Region Foundation (PNWER). This group will explore short-term and longer-term railroad actions that will improve the performance of Amtrak Cascades and potentially allow for future additional daily service to and from British Columbia, in alignment with the Amtrak Cascades Service Development Plan. Cascades Gateway Working Group members will include representatives from Amtrak, WSDOT, VIA Rail Canada, BNSF Railway, Transport Canada, the British Columbia Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, Canadian National Railway, and the British Columbia Business Council. Meetings will start in early 2025.

Conclusion

During 2024, significant work was undertaken to advance the Amtrak Cascades intercity passenger rail program. The addition of two more daily roundtrips between Seattle and Portland was long anticipated by passengers and led to a significant increase in ridership. Trains across the WSDOT-segments between Vancouver, B.C., Seattle, and Portland often were sold-out during the summer months.

State, local and private funding was leveraged to obtain significant federal funding for capital improvements and planning activities during 2024. New Amtrak Cascades trainsets and

locomotives are under construction, and coordination and preparation are well underway for their arrival in 2026.

Amtrak Cascades 2024 and 2025 planning activities will provide the framework for further enhancements to the service and identify specific capital improvements that will be needed to expand service over the next 20 years. WSDOT continues to promote train trips as the smart and environmentally friendly way to travel and looks forward to welcoming more and more people on Amtrak Cascades trains in the future.