

Report: Improvements to Pittsburgh-Harrisburg train service would be costly

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By Jon Schmitz / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Kenneth Diggs of Baltimore rides on the Pennsylvanian, a passenger train that runs between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg. Michael Henninger/Post-Gazette

Shaving about a half-hour from the travel time of passenger trains between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg would require nearly \$10 billion in track and station improvements, according to a study released this morning.

The Keystone West High Speed Rail study, which was begun by PennDOT in 2011, looked at four options for improving service in the corridor, which currently is served by one Amtrak train per day that requires 5 1/2 hours to go from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg or vice versa.

The highest-scoring options were a plan to modify curves within the existing railroad right of way at a cost of \$1.5 billion, producing an estimated time savings of only five to nine minutes; and the \$10 billion alternative, which adds curve straightening and track realignments that would be outside the existing right of way and require property acquisition.

That option would save an estimated 29 to 35 minutes per trip, the report said.

Adding a continuous third track to the route would push the cost to \$13.1 billion and an all-new electrified passenger-only rail line between the two cities would cost more than \$38 billion, which is not feasible, the study concluded. The current route is owned by Norfolk Southern and also used by freight trains.

The report acknowledged that it is "unlikely" that a comprehensive program of improvements could be done all at once and suggested that they could be made incrementally "based on need, expected benefits and funding availability."

The report suggested a rail or bus connection be established from the Tyrone station to State College.

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If the \$10 billion in improvements were implemented and a second daily trip was added, forecast ridership by 2020 would increase by more than 50 percent compared with ridership if no improvements are made, the report said.

The report can be viewed at www.planthekeystone.com by clicking on the resources tab and selecting Keystone West. PennDOT is accepting public comment through the end of March at the email address KeystoneWest@planthekeystone.com.

source: post-gazette.com