



Boosting train travel in Pennsylvania is a complicated challenge

ELIZABETH DALEY | THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2014

It seems like you can't walk a mile in Pittsburgh without crossing tracks or hearing the sound of passing trains. At night, whistles blow, waking babies and sparking the barking of dogs.

The constant presence of trains is not an illusion. Recent analysis by PublicSource found that 40 percent of Pittsburgh residents live near enough to crude oil routes to be at risk if a train derails and catches fire, but despite proximity to tracks, city residents say they can't catch a break when it comes to riding the rails out of town. Only two trains run out of Union Station per day, and to get from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg, just 204 miles away, takes five and a half hours -- two hours longer than the journey takes by car.

Meanwhile, state officials and train aficionados are working hard to make sure locomotive travel isn't reduced to simply a romantic notion, and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) has launched a number of initiatives aimed at boosting ridership.

For example, PennDOT has partnered with Amtrak to create PATripsByTrain.com, a showcase of the wonderful places to visit by train between Harrisburg and Philadelphia, and launched Access the Keystone, a study to identify ways in which different modes of transportation might be used to travel to and from train stations across the state.

In the eastern part of the state, the Department of Transportation has had success. Passenger travel on the Keystone line, serving destinations between Harrisburg and Philadelphia, has expanded significantly since 2006, when an express train began traversing the track. According to PennDOT spokeswoman Erin Waters-Trasatt, the Keystone line registered about 1.3 million trips last fiscal year, up from 890,000 before the 2006 upgrade.

More improvements are planned and many have been completed at stations along the line and on the track itself. Once the upgrade of the State Interlocking at Harrisburg is finished, trains will be able to switch lanes more swiftly, cutting the 90-minute trip from Harrisburg to Philadelphia by three to four minutes. Transportation officials are also looking at reducing the number of railroad crossings along the line, allowing trains to travel at faster speeds.

"Ridership has been going up and the train is really competitive with a vehicle, especially in suburban areas of Philadelphia," says Waters-Trasatt. "Even the stations themselves are attracting different types of businesses. There was a brewery in Elizabethtown [Moo-Duck Brewery] that was attracted to the area near the station because of improvements that were made."

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On the Keystone line, Amtrak trains travel at speeds of up to 110 miles per hour and average about 75 miles per hour. On the Pennsylvanian, which runs from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg, average train speeds are just 45 miles per hour, with maximum speeds of 79 miles per hour.

In addition to infrastructure problems, passengers say trains on the Pennsylvanian could be cleaner and newer, and many, including rail traveler Karen Lillis, would like to see station upgrades. Lillis frequently travels to Washington, D.C. and New York City, stopping at Philadelphia's 30th Street Station.

"I would love to see the train station in Pittsburgh become more of a 'place,' with food and maybe shops," she says, lauding 30th Street for its bookstore, post office and many dining options (including healthy ones). "I can get off the train when it stops there for 25 minutes and get my lunch on the way from New York City."

Lillis enjoys her time on trains, but thinks riding the rails in Western Pennsylvania has some drawbacks.

"The tough part about traveling by train from Pittsburgh is that Amtrak does not own their own rails out here," she explains. "They share them with the freights, so they get delayed behind freight delays. For years, the D.C. train was running two to three hours late every time. Then they cleaned it up, and it ran on time for a few years. But it still gets delayed at random, wildly inconvenient intervals. If you count on being on time, you may ruin your plans."

According to Waters-Trasatt, PennDOT only recently became responsible for the operational budget of the Pennsylvania line, and while Amtrak operates service on both the Keystone and Pennsylvanian lines, it only owns track for the Keystone. A freight company, Norfolk Southern Railway, owns the tracks that the Pennsylvanian line uses. And while Gov. Tom Corbett recently announced \$35.9 million in funding for upgrades to freight lines across the state, upgrading Norfolk Southern's line was not among the 39 projects selected.

"Norfolk Southern has the right of way with traffic, they have the priority of passage," say Waters-Trasatt, explaining why Amtrak trains often travel so slowly on the Pennsylvanian route.

Craig Schulz, a spokesman for Amtrak, said the company would love to see improvements on the route. "From Amtrak's perspective, anything that's going to create better conditions for operations of trains is something we are very interested in," he explains. Norfolk Southern could not be reached for comment.

In 2011, a study began to determine whether it was feasible to reduce passenger travel times and increase train frequency on the Pennsylvanian route. The final draft of the report was completed in May 2013, but hasn't yet been released to the public; the Federal Railroad Administration is still reviewing it.

"We anticipate that the study will be complete before the end of the year," wrote administration spokesman Michael England in an email. "Once complete, the study will be available to the public on our website."

Waters-Trasatt encouraged citizens concerned about train travel to get in touch with elected officials and to attend public PennDOT meetings to raise the issue. State grant money is allocated each year for

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revitalizing stations from PennDOT and the Multimodal Transportation Fund.

The Multimodal Transportation Fund offers funds for rail service, bus and transportation center improvements; streetscape, lighting, sidewalk and bicycle/pedestrian safety enhancements; coordinating transit services; rail-freight sidings and freight track upgrades; airport development and improvement to Pennsylvania's ports, among other things. The fund is replenished each year and may be obtained by municipalities, community development groups or businesses. A spokeswoman at the Pittsburgh Mayor's Office said she was not sure whether the city had applied for such funding. Meanwhile, Rich Kirkpatrick, a spokesman for PennDOT, said the fund could be used to improve Pennsylvanian service, though he didn't think it had been yet sought for that purpose.

So what's a Pennsylvania train fan to do? For many Western Pennsylvanians, the answer is take shorter trips, or simply don't travel by train. Former train rider Katy Lev says she stopped riding the rails when her third child was born.

"Train travel is great for young families...but the logistics of getting to and from the station in Pittsburgh, paired with the times of the trains make it nearly impossible," she explains.

Trains sometimes leave the Pittsburgh station not long after city buses start running, causing a problem for passengers who don't want to drive to the station. There is a lack of affordable long-term parking -- and since there are only two trains per day (one on each route), it's not like passengers can wait for a later train. Lev's parents live near Harrisburg and her husband fantasizes about bringing bikes on the train and riding them 30 miles along a bike path to the family's home, solving the problem of where to park their car and how to get to and from the stations.

Katie Oldaker, who loves train rides, says the length of time it takes to get to major destinations like New York City or Chicago from Pittsburgh deters her.

"I can pay usually \$60 more [to fly] and get there in half the time," says Oldaker. "When I lived in New York, I took the train to Harrisburg a few times a year, and that was a more reasonable trip, since, if I remember correctly, the trains can travel faster on those tracks."

Tickets on the Pennsylvanian from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg start at \$41, and go up in price depending upon class and availability. Though Megabus tickets to the state capital cost less and buses get riders to Harrisburg faster, many passengers still prefer to stick with the rails, both for vacationing and commuting.

Kayla Washko, who lives in Pittsburgh and travels to Johnstown for work, said the train -- which takes about an hour and a half and costs \$16 -- is still her best bet.

"It's perfect for my schedule because it arrives at the start of the business day in Johnstown [9:05 a.m.] and departs at the end of the workday, around 6 p.m.," she explains. "I can get a lot of meeting prep done on the way since I am not driving."

Riders on the Pennsylvanian are sure that more people would climb aboard if train service was only slightly faster and more reliable, because riding is relaxing and fun. Trains offer time for contemplation --

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or time for surfing the Internet on Amtrak's courtesy Wi-Fi.

"Trains make me feel like I'm gaining time," muses Lillis. "I have this unscheduled time to myself. It's a relaxing ride, lots of leg room, no anxiety for me. I have been riding trains since 1987. I used to do a lot of drawing on the train, then it was photography, now it's reading and writing."

In an age where everyone is focused on getting to destinations as quickly as possible, train travel offers passengers the quaint -- some might say archaic -- notion of the journey being the destination.

When Sherrie Flick heads to New York City from Pittsburgh, she always takes the train and enjoys the lengthy ride.

"We bring a feast and a bottle of wine and lots of reading and writing work to do," she says. "I consider the long trip part of the getaway. The view through central PA is so pretty -- always reminds me of a Millet painting."

Sleeping on the train, waking up to its soothing sound and scenic views, is both nostalgic and luxurious. The dining car, complete with chairs and tables, provides room for a unique and relaxed form of socialization that doesn't take place on cramped planes and buses, where people are packed together like sardines.

Geeta Kothari uses her train trips from Pittsburgh to New York to remember her mother.

"When my parents were alive, my mother used to pack me a picnic for my train ride; now I do that for myself," she recalls. "I remember she took a lot of pleasure in finding the right treats for me. She also loved the train, but she always said if she spent 10 hours on a train she wanted to at least end up in a different country -- since flights to India take 13 hours, I see her point."

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