

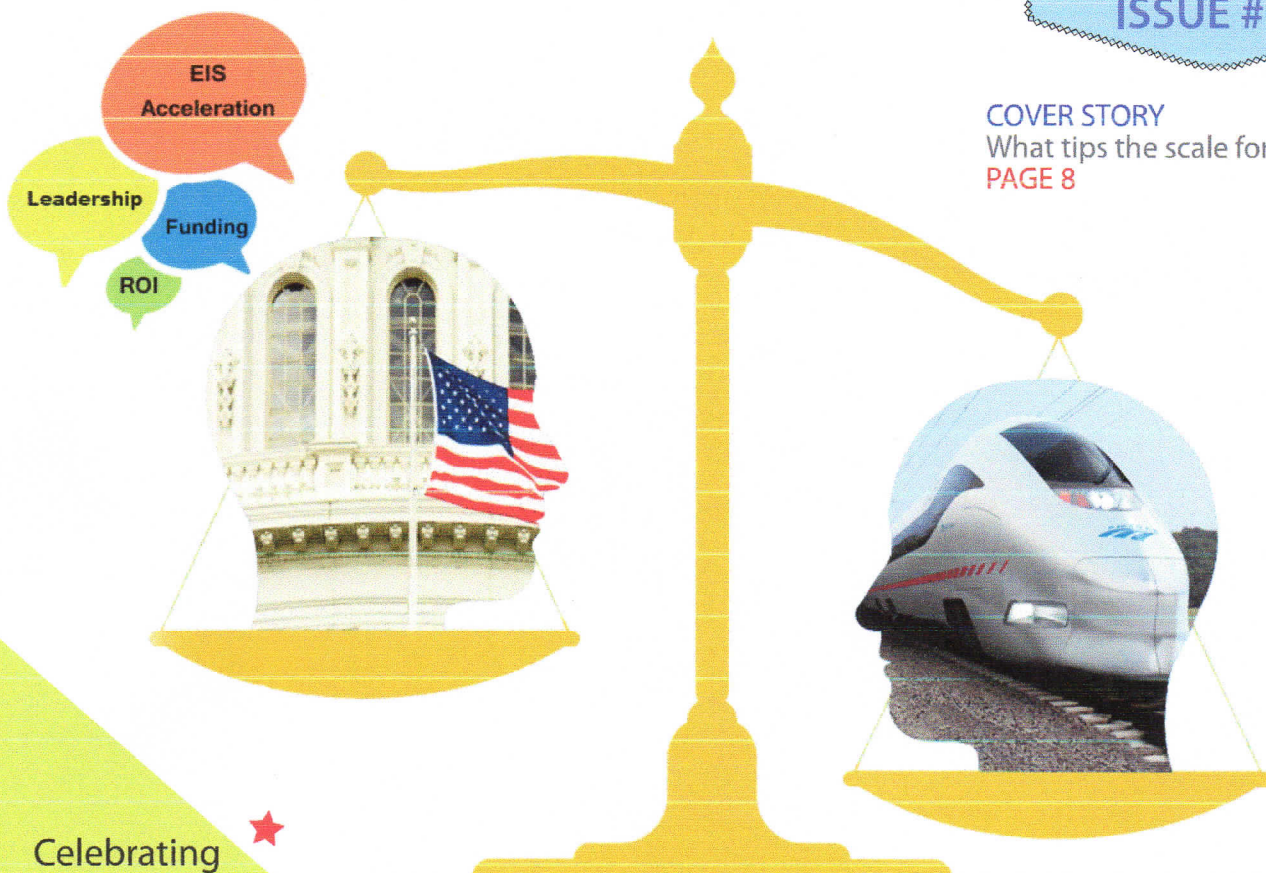


HIGH-SPEED INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL

# SPEEDLINES

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# LEGISLATIVE NEWS



PRIIA 2014

Contributed by Peter Peyser



A major congressional committee recently approved on a unanimous voice vote a major piece of legislation introduced by its bipartisan leadership with no amendments and no controversy.

When was the last time you read a sentence even remotely like that? Well, that sentence reflects the reality of what occurred at the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure on September 16th. Chairman Bill Shuster (R-PA) presided over a committee session in which he, Railroad Subcommittee Chair Jeff Denham (R-CA), full committee Ranking Member Nick Rahall (D-WV) and subcommittee Ranking Member Corinne Brown (D-FL) congratulated one another and their colleagues for arriving at a compromise on legislation to reauthorize Amtrak and fund intercity rail projects nationwide.

The bill is called the Passenger Rail Reform and Investment Act of 2014 (H.R. 5449). The acronym – PRIIA – is pronounced “PREE-ya”, which sounds exactly the same as the pronunciation of the previous rail law PRIIA. But the two are very different.

The bill is remarkable for the important changes it makes to Amtrak’s process for planning and implementing projects and for the role it envisions for states. The growing importance of states in national intercity rail policy and funding is demonstrated by a word search of the legislation itself. The bill contains the word “Secretary” (as in the Secretary of Transportation) 60 times. It mentions “state” or “states” 66 times. (It is also interesting to note it uses the phrase “public private partnership” a grand total of one time.)

This state focus is reflected in the numerous planning processes the bill would put in place. Whether it’s for the Northeast Corridor, the National Network, or the Gulf Coast, the bill would require Amtrak to develop five-year operating and/or capital plans that reflect input and, in some cases, funding from the states. With regard to the multiple plans called for in the bill, one GOP staffer was heard to say, “We could get thrown out of the Republican party for drafting a bill with so much planning in it.” Somewhere, the old Soviet Politburo is smiling.



PRIIA 2014, like any well-crafted compromise, gives both Republicans and Democrats some good talking points. Here are some of the key points one might hear from both sides about the same provisions in the bill.

	Republican Talking Point	Democratic Talking Point
Amtrak Funding	Cuts Amtrak's authorization by 40% to about \$1.3 billion in FY 2015.	Keeps Amtrak at currently appropriated levels and allows for small increases.
Intercity Passenger Rail Grants	A modest program \$ 300 million with a strong focus on the Northeast Corridor, the place where investment makes the most sense.	While modest, the program allows for progress to be made in every region of the country.
Amtrak Bookkeeping	Requires Amtrak to keep all Northeast Corridor revenues in a separate account.	Allows Amtrak to transfer Northeast Corridor revenues to preserve the national network upon notification to Congress.
Northeast Corridor Planning	Requires Amtrak to bring the perspectives of states and the NEC commission into its process.	Preserves Amtrak's central role in funding and managing the corridor.
P3	Requires Amtrak to explore P3's to leverage station-area development and to maximize ancillary revenue on rights-of-way.	Keeps private operators off the Amtrak system.
California High-Speed Rail	Includes new standards for major projects (>\$1 billion in federal grants) to prevent projects from being started that can't be finished with the service standards promised.	Contains no provision limiting federal participation in the California High-Speed Rail program.

So now what? Most observers see it as highly unlikely this bill will go further before the end of the 113th Congress this December. Congress will return for its post-election session in November and will be occupied with approving spending bills, perhaps the extension of some tax breaks and little else. That means this bill will need to be re-introduced in the new Congress and approved again by the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. At that point, attention will shift to the Senate side and to the broader transportation agenda, which includes the need to find revenues for highway and transit programs by the end of May next year.

The unlikelihood of quick action on the PRIIA legislation should not obscure its significance. It is a bipartisan bill that seeks to continue the federal commitment to Amtrak and to bring more focus to the role of the states in developing new high speed rail service. Intercity passenger rail advocates should take heart in that. It is as good a product as one could hope for in today's House of Representatives. Access to dedicated funding and more robust funding amounts will need to be tackled later and by others.

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