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## HIGH-SPEED INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL

# SPEEDLINES

MARCH 2015  
ISSUE #14

# Tokyo 2015

50  
YEARS

OF HIGH-SPEED RAIL

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## Shinjuku Station, Tokyo, Japan



# LEGISLATIVE NEWS



2015

Contributed by Peter Peyser



The 114th Congress convened on January 6th, 2015. History will likely record that a more important event took place on that very same day – Governor Jerry Brown of California broke ground on the first segment of the California high-speed rail network. The extent to which the convening of Congress will offer any competition with that in terms of contribution to the nation’s transportation agenda remains to be seen.

Barely five weeks after Congress convened, the U.S. House of Representative’s Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (T&I Committee) reprised its action from last fall in passing the “Passenger Rail Reform and Investment Act” (H.R. 749). This version of “PRIIA” was essentially identical to the bill of the same title passed by the committee in September of 2014. The recent action was required because all pending legislation died at the end of the 113th Congress in December. In order to put the bill back before the full House, the Committee was required to re-pass it.

As we noted in the previous edition of SPEEDLINES, this legislation is notable for its new requirements on Amtrak to be more transparent in its bookkeeping and to create more partnerships for planning service and improvements on the national intercity passenger rail network. In addition to reauthorizing and restructuring Amtrak funding, it also creates grant programs to support improvements to the national rail network. The committee session that approved the bill was notable in that there was no mention of the California high-speed rail project.

High-speed rail advocacy groups, including the Midwest High-Speed Rail Association, pointed out after the House committee action that the spending levels in the bill -- \$1.8 billion per year – fall short of the \$9.5 billion level identified by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) as required to maintain and improve the current intercity passenger rail network.

On the House side, the T&I Committee is preparing to turn its attention to the reauthorization of highway and transit programs. Current programs expire on May 31 and the Highway Trust Fund, which partially supports them, is once again facing insolvency. In the discussion on Capitol Hill over raising revenue to shore up those programs there is virtually no mention of one of the intercity passenger rail community’s top goals – gaining a dedicated revenue source for passenger rail programs. Barring some unforeseen developments, that issue may have to wait for another time.

On the Senate side, rail safety issues relating to both freight and passenger rail are driving the conversation – not the reauthorization of Amtrak or intercity passenger rail. Part of the reason for this emphasis is the change of leadership in the Senate. With the new GOP majority, the committee with jurisdiction of rail issues – Commerce,



Science and Transportation – is now chaired by Sen. John Thune (R-SD). Sen. Thune has a long-standing interest in the rail freight industry and comes at it from the perspective of a Senator representing strong shipper constituencies in the agricultural sector. The safety and efficiency of the national freight network have been his foremost concerns when it comes to rail matters.

Another part of the reason for the Senate's areas of focus can be found in a review of recent news. On February 6, six people died in suburban New York when a Metro North train on the New Haven line struck an SUV at a crossing. On February 16, a CSX train with more than 100 oil tanker cars derailed in West Virginia. The resulting fire and explosions required the evacuation of a nearby town.

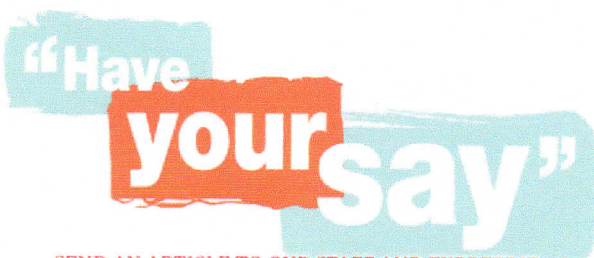
The oil tanker derailment cited above will rekindle the conversation in Washington about standards for the construction of oil tankers and the timeline on which new, stronger, tankers must be put in service. The Senate Commerce committee has given attention to this issue in recent years and more can be expected this spring. The result of that attention is likely to be legislation on the issue of oil tanker safety.

The accident at the grade crossing in suburban New York brings together a number of threads in the conversation in the Senate over passenger rail. Because this accident was one of several in recent years, it has intensified discussion over the need for more safety regulation of commuter railroads. It has also pointed out the crucial link between safety improvements and funding shortfalls for passenger rail systems.

The Senate Commerce Committee leadership is likely to soon start seeking a consensus of committee members on how to move forward on rail legislation. The safety of the freight and commuter networks and access to the freight network for all shippers will be top of mind for the leadership, with Amtrak reauthorization a secondary issue. Having said that, the Committee has Amtrak legislation on its shelf from 2013 and it would not take a great deal of effort to dust it off and begin moving it.

So as we assess the landscape for rail legislation early in the 114th Congress, it appears that the House and the Senate will both make progress on rail legislation – although they come at it from differing perspectives. The extent to which they come together on a plan that helps advance the cause of intercity passenger rail will depend largely on the intensity of effort by advocates to bring focus to the need for federal investment.

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"The 114th Congress is the most diverse in the nation's history, surpassing the mark set by the 113th Congress and containing more women and minorities than any previous congress. Between both chambers, 96 racial minority members and 104 women from both parties are serving in Congress as of February 2015. According to outside analysis, 59 percent of House Democrats elected to the 114th Congress were women, minorities or LGBT.