

# Rick Booth's 22-Point Amtrak Platform

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# Elaboration

## 1) Protection of Commuter Legacy Interests

This is my home base. This is what brought me into the fight. America's national railroad has an obligation to the 2,000 daily commuters who took jobs based on an expectation of fair treatment and policy stability. When a typical pay differential between New York City jobs and comparable Philadelphia jobs stands at about \$10,000, it is wrong to toss a year-to-year \$9737 pay cut at trusting commuters on 11 days' notice as was done in September. If, as I do not yet believe, such a rate increase is actually warranted, a year's notice at minimum, followed by at least a 1-year phase-in is required. Amtrak must work to minimize the social pain and damage to its most vulnerable riders.

## 2) Crossing the Delaware

The difference between a commuter stepping on a train to go home to the east bank of the Delaware River at Trenton and a similar commuter stepping on a train to go home to the first Amtrak station beyond the Delaware's west bank will stand at \$6,744 after-tax dollars as of the fare increase scheduled for February 16th. The east bank is serviced by New Jersey Transit express trains at \$320/month. The only option for a direct ride home west of the Delaware is Amtrak at \$882/month at Cornwells Heights (up from \$499/month a year ago) and \$1008/month from central Philadelphia. Though Washington crossed the Delaware in 1776, Washington, D.C. has chosen to re-erect the barrier. Amtrak and Washington should back it down to reasonable levels (\$599 at CWH, \$699 at PHL, \$799 at WIL) at least until an alternative carrier can be found.

## 3) Tunnels & Tracks

The choking point of the Northeast Corridor is the two single-track tunnels to New York City that the Pennsylvania Railroad put under the Hudson River in 1910, almost 100 years ago. Those tunnels limit the traffic the Northeast Corridor can carry, and the ripple effect of the choked capacity at the Hudson has reached all the way to the Delaware in the form of one of the justifications for Amtrak's attempt to throw commuters off its trains. The Hudson choke point plus the law of supply and demand means Amtrak feels it can get away with price gouging on commuters. I want another tunnel built, and more tracks to Newark so that New York City and its commuters can breathe again.

## 4) Wireless Internet Access

The most common enhancement request I hear asked for by Amtrak riders is wireless Internet access on its trains. Some people already have it via cell phone company premium hardware for their laptops, but more commonly riders just have garden variety laptop wireless. Amtrak can charge a premium for this service, enhancing the productivity of its riders in the process.

## 5) The Hunt for Lost Stations

I do not believe for a minute that Cornwells Heights is the only rail station in America where Amtrak forgot to send schedules, post signs, or tell the station manager when its trains would arrive and leave and where they were going. Until I forced Amtrak to

correct their online information, their own official website's mapping software showed maps with the location of the Cornwells Heights station marked three miles away from where it actually was, guiding people to the home of a little old lady selling cemetery decorations on her lawn. No one knows how many stations Amtrak has lost throughout America, but we'll hunt them down and find them and we won't forget ever again.

#### 6) High-Tech Travel Planning

A huge portion of the public's under-use of mass transit is due to the difficulty of knowing when and where the buses and trains are running, and planning trips accordingly. With computers and cell phones and GPS guidance, though, it may not be long until you just tell your cell where you want to go, and it hands you a plan. This is the stuff Google loves to just suddenly roll out without warning and, with good reason, take even more credit for managing the world's information. Amtrak should lead the national pack in working to standardize such future access across its network and the regional transit systems it reaches. The Amtrak website hasn't significantly changed in the last five years and could use an upgrade as well.

#### 7) PR Honesty

Amtrak has a long-standing reputation for PR dishonesty and general weaseliness towards both the public and the government that feeds it. In my experience, it's almost as if just telling the truth never crosses the collective corporate mind. I want to see Amtrak play by a policy of substantial truthfulness in all of its communications. I wish to see Amtrak give fair warning to the transit systems it touches and the government jurisdictions through which it passes when it plans major changes in service. Amtrak only announced the planned closure of the Cornwells Heights station two months before it was to have gone into effect, and they only did it then because the conductors tipped me off, and I forced the truth out of the company and then took it to politicians and the press. I suspect that their original plan was to give not more than a week's notice. Amtrak's stealth and deceit must stop. The 11 days' notice on the original September fare increase was also forced out of them by rumors that made it to the press, who in turn asked for the truth. Past fare increases have come without warning, so they may have planned to just change the price one day with no notice at all. This is wrong.

#### 8) Signage and Advertising

One thing that I very much doubt that Amtrak understands is that the visibility and public awareness of its services is not a given when they set up shop in a big city. In major American cities, local bus and rail transit systems can almost get away without putting up signage or posting promotional fliers at all. Word of mouth is sometimes virtually enough to promote a heavily used transit system. If Amtrak is in that system, too, though, it may be almost entirely masked from visibility or awareness by the more popular local transit services. This is exactly what has happened in Philadelphia where since time immemorial the SEPTA rail maps of southeastern Pennsylvania only show one Amtrak connection point in their entire network at 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station in central Philadelphia (and the same is stated in prose on their website). There are about ten other stations on their maps that are also served by Amtrak. Neither SEPTA nor Amtrak seems to have cared enough about this oversight – which has gone on now for probably 30 years

– to bother correcting it. I'll bet it's cost them at least a million passengers in Philadelphia alone.

#### 9) Corridor Passenger Comfort Standard

Amtrak train time is uniquely productive time for its commuting riders. Because of the high standard of passenger comfort on Amtrak trains, it is easy both to sleep and to work. Adequate room for a fold-down tray and a soft reclining seat make all the difference. These standard amenities are rarely available on local transit rail or bus carriers, which is probably fine where the commute time is expected to be short (30 minutes or less, say). As longer commutes by rail increase with population growth and urban sprawl, transit agencies should recognize that there is considerable social and commercial benefit to providing an environment in which passengers can rest and work. Indeed, many of my fellow long-distance commuters regard their hours of train time as the most productive of their day, away from office interruptions and hence able to maintain their focus. Amtrak can lead the way by promoting at least the idea of a federally sanctioned standard of amenities for long-distance corridor commuting. Packing commuters 20% closer together on molded plastic benches may be OK for the half-hour runs, but at 45 minutes and up, there is good reason to trade up for more comfortable train cars. Rail is uniquely suited to give back quality time to its riders, much more so than buses or automobiles. Comfortable rail makes long distance commuting possible. Rail corridors will only work if the train cars are up to snuff, even if that means paying a bit more for the ride.

#### 10) Train Time Productivity Recognition

To further provide incentives for long-distance commuting and the establishment of new commuting corridors, Amtrak could easily promote a new mindset in big city American businesses by simply allowing them to register themselves as Amtrak-friendly (or corridor-friendly) employers. At one level all this might mean is that they don't punish their employees for coming in a few minutes late when a verified train delay for that employee is reported. At another level it could mean that they give comp time to employees for business hours worked on trains. Most companies only care that the work gets done, and would be glad for a sanctioned way to give their long-distance commuter employees (who are often among their most valuable) a break.

#### 11) Energy and the Environment

The truth about the energy savings and environmental benefits of rail commuting is very elusive. Enemies of rail cite one set of slanted numbers and energy and environmental advocates cite equally insubstantial numbers to back themselves up. In my own research, which has involved digging down to some GAO reports that seem to be the source of some of the controversy, I've concluded that neither side has done the necessary work and hard analysis to figure out what's real and what's not about much of what they say. I've found that I like GAO reports, and they're actually usually quite well written, but one has to be very careful about how one plays with the math. In the end, what we really need is a long-term plan taking the best possible understanding of the numbers and projections as to what \$10 gasoline is going to do to transit systems and the environment in ten or twenty years if we don't start planning for it now. I've met and corresponded with plenty of rail and environmental advocates in the past six months, but I have yet to meet deep, meaningful numbers that I really believe. I'll keep hunting, and when I find

something that is believable, explainable, and significant, I hope to communicate it publicly as best I can.

## 12) Infrastructure Maintenance

There isn't a lot of glory in shoring up crumbling concrete on a bridge, nor in replacing a catenary (overhead electric wire) as old as my grandfather. Deferred maintenance is the "easy out" a railroad can take in any given year to make its bottom line look better than it really is. It can result in service degradation, increased future expenses for repair and replacement, loss of safety, and death. We have to understand it and commit to the price tag, or else plan on retiring the rail system altogether in a few years. In between is worse.

## 13) Investigation of the Northeast Corridor Split and Privatization Options

What appears to have led to the firing of David Gunn by Amtrak's Board of Directors in November were the twin issues of splitting off a Northeast Corridor subsidiary within Amtrak and the possibility of privatizing train operations both inside and outside the Corridor at some future point. As I understand it, David Gunn was adamantly opposed to separating maintenance of track from train operations. The official Board position was that no definite decision had been made about creating the Corridor subsidiary, and there were no current plans to privatize corridor operations. The Board seemingly ordered Mr. Gunn to make all preparations for the Corridor split so that they could pretty much just sign the papers if they felt like it after he delivered them. He maintained that their intent was clearly to split off the corridor, privatize the trains, and probably let rail service in the rest of the country drop dead in bankruptcy. When Amtrak sneezes, my station at Cornwells Heights catches pneumonia, so I intend to understand the implications of a Corridor split, both with and without privatization, before going along with any plan to mess with the Corridor's trains. Amtrak's neglect of the Cornwells Heights station may be indicative that the Corridor is still not well understood.

## 14) Unions and Morale

I speak with Amtrak employees almost every business day, and I frequently hear stories of trouble between management and labor. Employees about to be laid off in November even invited me down to Philadelphia's 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station for a "crumbling infrastructure" tour of the less-than-pretty underside of the station where the work gets done. I am aware that there are ongoing problems affecting productivity, route flexibility, and, perhaps most importantly, morale in the ranks. I don't necessarily have a "magic bullet" solution to the management-labor rifts, but I intend to continue to listen, investigate, and look for a win-win way out of the difficulties.

## 15) Coordination with States on Corridor Development Projects

There is a good bit of rail transit talk about the future development of high speed rail corridors of a few hundred miles linking some American cities. Montana need not apply, but larger population centers close enough together for rail to give reasonable competition to the airlines – especially as airline fuel prices rise – are good candidates. Some say Amtrak's current operations prevent private concerns or states from developing such corridors. Some begrudge Amtrak its subsidies because that could also be corridor seed money. Most corridor talk seems to assume that states and private enterprise need to

be cut loose to make such lines happen. I don't know how real it is yet. There is a lot to be said for, at minimum, coordination of standards of engineering and operation within a national umbrella. Likewise, rolling stock purchases made more efficient and affordable by pooling across corridors would seem to make sense. These are all fascinating issues, and I don't yet know where the Amtrak logo should or should not end up within future corridor systems, but I will be glad to try to understand.

#### 16) Honest Long-Term Planning and Implementation

Short-term planning may be just fine for the annual family summer vacation, but it's no substitute for long-term planning in running a railroad. It takes years to establish new lines and millions to replace a neglected bridge. I have read that Amtrak has several times managed to incur debt more or less in the federal government's name (i.e. because everyone assumes the federal government will pay Amtrak's debts no matter what) without consulting or informing the government in the process. As I understand it, the mortgaging of New York's Penn Station a few years ago, so that Amtrak could make payroll, was somewhat of that nature. Part of the Acela program development appears to have involved debt sleight of hand as well. There also appears to be an ongoing selling off of real estate assets to improve the bottom line, and this may soon even include Philadelphia's Penn Coach Yard. This is not Enron-caliber stuff, but it is worrisome when a corporation dependent on Uncle Sam to pay its bills has the power to say "Charge it!" without clear governmental buy-in and understanding of the long-term game plan.

#### 17) Establishment of Policies Toward Long-Distance Routes and Funding

The Northeast Corridor is not the be-all and end-all of passenger rail service in America, but it does seem to be the tail that wags the dog. The heaviest criticism that Amtrak gets, though, is usually about the losses of its long-distance routes where it would allegedly be cheaper to hand riders plane tickets than to run the trains. Pork barrel politics has a lot to do with it, but there is much more to it. I'm not at all sure what the best solution for the rest of the country is right now, but I'll look hard at the problems with special attention to the social impacts of loss of services, even when balanced against the creation of new ones.

#### 18) Consideration for Aviophobes

The last time I saw Isaac Asimov, he was hailing a cab at 64<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, preparing to ride around town with wheels on the ground the way he liked it. He only flew twice in his life while in the military, and he was largely dependent on trains for any long-distance travel. He had a severe fear of flying. Interestingly enough, I've heard and read that a significant fraction of the people riding the long-distance trains do so because they have similar fears and can't travel by air. When I was recently at the Amtrak Union Station offices, I inquired as to what Amtrak knew about how many of its long-distance passengers were there because they couldn't fly. The answer, to my dismay, was that no one knows or has investigated it. Aviophobes are often cited as one of the reasons to keep Amtrak long-distance routes in operation, but we can't weigh the economics against the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) unless we understand their numbers. I would call for an aviophobe (and other disabilities, like medical intolerance to rapid air pressure changes, which preclude planes as well) survey.

## 19) Subsidy Education

Passenger rail has been unprofitable since about 1950. It was only government regulation that kept parts of it in service until the '70s when the railroads were finally given the option to toss their unprofitable passenger routes into a government bucket called Amtrak. Though it was hoped that an efficiency of scale could bring the lines near break-even, to expect passenger routes that private industry couldn't make money on to somehow gel into profit has always been fairly nonsensical. Most national rail systems, and virtually all regional transit systems for large metropolitan areas are supported by public funds – subsidies. Society gains, even for those who do not use public transportation systems, when transportation alternatives are supported. America, through a quirk in the national conscience and the legacy of having incorporated Amtrak as an independent company outside of direct government controls (other than supplemental funding and appointments to its Board), goes through annual cycles of bashing the railroad for not making money, for which there should also be a way of nationally saying “Duh!” Once upon a time, armies were also considered profit centers, expected to pillage or go out of business. I would like to work the message that some things are worthy of public support.

## 20) Waste Research

Wherever there is government spending, there will be degrees of waste. Amtrak is particularly susceptible to attack because people know what a train is and what, for instance, a hamburger should cost, even if bought on a train. Much has been made of a recent GAO report showing that it costs Amtrak \$10 to sell a \$5 sandwich. Sounds profoundly stupid – but when you have to put a \$3 million rail car and two or three full-time employees on a cross-country train, the costs add up. If you try to sell the sandwich for \$10, people will go hungry and/or get outraged. If you take the food car off the train, they won't ride long-distance at all. You might as well take out the toilets or charge \$10 to sit on the can, because the rest rooms they put on every car aren't making money either. The matter of what's waste and what isn't is not as simple as fast food math would make it seem, and I hope to look for and communicate where the waste really is and isn't.

## 21) Sunshine Law Accountability

Though many people think Amtrak is just an arm of the government, it isn't. It is a government-created step-child orphan of a private company not subject to the normal “sunshine laws” (i.e. Freedom of Information Act) that allow the public to scrutinize the spending and operation they pay for. Amtrak was built this way because the federal government didn't think it wanted to be in the railroad business when it created Amtrak, so they made it a sort of private company outside the government, where they vainly hoped at first that it would either figure out how to break even (not likely, since it was formed from money-losing lines given away by the freight rail industry) or die outside the government's direct jurisdiction. Instead, it has limped along on government subsidies because Congress has never been willing to let it die, after all. Unfortunately, even though Amtrak's Board of Directors is entirely appointed by the U.S. President, renegade policy and financial actions are still able to flourish inside the cloak of this nominally private company. And even on the Board, for instance, there is virtually no public record at all of the views and contributions of two of the four current Board

members, Messrs. Hall and Sosa, who came to the Board with no transportation experience and have made no known demonstration of their command of rail issues since then. I would like to see the decisions and actions of Amtrak and its Board brought, either voluntarily or involuntarily, under closer public scrutiny. (And this would, I hope, include *me*.) It is, after all, our *de facto* national passenger railroad.

## 22) Accessibility

In a month of trying to communicate with any member of the Amtrak Board of Directors at all, I have gotten no farther than being told by a DOT surrogate that the Transportation Department's representative on the Board is curious whether or not I have been able to get in touch with the Chairman of the Board, Mr. David Laney. And there are "no openings" on Mr. Laney's schedule at all, according to the delightful, slightly nervous secretary at his Dallas law office. The men running Amtrak today are quite busy and seem not to be very accessible. I would like to offer quite the opposite. I'm on Amtrak two hours just about every work day, and I intend to consider those hours to be open Board walk-in time for anyone who wants or needs to talk. Anyone from inside or outside Amtrak, from the heights of Congress to the depths of just-trying-to-get-to-work commuting, is welcome to talk rail concerns with me on train time. If you're coming up from Washington, Baltimore, or Philadelphia on train 180 in the morning, just save me a seat and tell a conductor where to park me when you stop at Cornwells Heights. (I usually board at the third or fourth car back.) If you're going back to Washington in the evening on train 193, same deal, and I'm usually in the first or second car. Other hours, trains, and stations available on request. Here's my cell: 215-837-6557. I look forward to seeing you there.