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Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
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AMTRAK PASSENGER SERVICE IN THE NORTHWEST

Mr. MANSFIELD. Mr. President, several days ago I again expressed my concern about the need for upgrading Amtrak passenger service in the Northwest. I do not know whether it is the energy crisis or the approaching holiday season, but the demand is reaching the crisis point. There, unfortunately, seems to be little response by the officials here in Washington. While there have been some improvements, not enough is being done, and perhaps too many of their policies are being guided by those associated with the railroad industry at the time their policy was to discourage and abandon passenger trains throughout the Nation.

I have received information indicating that, as of November 30, in the State of Montana alone over 1,000 persons have been unable to obtain confirmed reservations during the period December 15, 1973, to January 4, 1974.

The inability of many travelers to obtain reservation space, a subject of recent editorial published in the Billings Gazette of Sunday, December 2. The article also points out that during this holiday period Amtrak is planning a reduction in services. It is very difficult to understand their reasoning.

I think, furthermore, that not only should more trains be on the track to provide more passenger service, but also that we should give the most serious consideration to transporting by rail, once again, the mail which has now been shifted to the airlines and the trucking industry. If that is done, it would compensate for the loss that Amtrak has been undergoing.

The time has come for Amtrak to make a sincere and realistic effort to provide passenger train service throughout the Nation. The American public will travel by train if given the opportunity and served by courteous personnel on adequate and upgraded equipment.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that an article, two editorials, and the text of a letter from a Montana constituent outlining his own personal experiences with Amtrak be printed at this point in the Record.

There being no objection, the article, two editorials, and letter were ordered to be printed in the Record, as follows:

AMTRAK MAY BE UNABLE TO PROVIDE SERVICE FOR ALL WHO WANT TO TRAVEL

(John MacKay)

"I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams." So went the sentimental song that Gisele sang during World War II.

Now in Energy Crisis-1973, it would seem that the refrain should be modified: "I’ll be home for Christmas—if I can get a ticket on jet plane, Amtrak or piggy-back.

Amtrak doesn’t look too promising. E. L. Gronbeck, head of Intercity Rail Passenger Service in Billings, reports his office has 160 holiday season reservations unfilled and on standby.

His counterpart in Havre, C. W. Carbone, said he hasn’t counted reservation requests yet, but noted that his office has "quite a stack" of requests for reservations.

Gronbeck said that "on account of the energy crisis we have had double the number of requests for Amtrak reservations. People don’t dare go more than 100 miles out of town in their automobiles." He said the requests average 2½ persons on each reservation.

Both Gronbeck and Carbone are hoping that Amtrak will be able to provide more facilities to take care of the holiday crunch.

But they note these restricting factors: Amtrak has a total of 1,900 cars—coaches, pullman and lounge facilities. There are at any one time about 400 cars in shops being repaired.

Thus, they say, there are an average of 1,500 cars at any given time to take care of the railroad passenger service in the United States.

Another unfavorable factor for additional Montana service is that Amtrak gives preferential treatment to areas that have 80 per cent or more ridership throughout the year.

Montana’s southern rail route Amtrak runs each way three times per week. Eastbounds depart Billings at 11:15 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays and Saturdays. Westbounds leave Billings at 11:15 a.m. Tuesday, Thursdays and Sundays.

Gronbeck said that each train leaving Billings now consists of eight cars, usually three coaches, a baggage car, a lounge car, and a diner.

He pointed out that if additional cars, say two or three, should become available 10 days before Christmas, this still would not take care of the passenger load.

Amtrak’s northern rail route now has one run each way daily. The eastbound leaves Havre at 11:15 a.m. and the westbound leaves at 3:35 p.m.

Equipment assigned by Amtrak includes two nonreserved seat coaches, two reserved seat coaches, two sleeping cars, a lounge (big done), a diner, a baggage car and two mail-storage cars.

Gronbeck said that Amtrak’s previous policy has been to add additional cars for the Christmas holiday season, but that so far he has received no word on plans for this season.

In the meantime Carbone is operating on a day-to-day basis. So far he has been able to accommodate passengers on the northern route. He indicated that soon, as the season’s passenger load increases, he probably won’t be.

The demise of passenger service as operated by the non-government railway companies with two eastbound and two westbound trains daily on both northern and southern routes was generally greeted with little resistance 2½ years ago.

But now that the family Betsy seems to be running short on gasoline, the conductor’s "All Aboard," might be followed with "As long as there is room.

A BIG, FAT PLUS

(duane W. Blowler)

It’s time to raise hell and plenty of it with Amtrak.

The holiday season is coming up and what does this Amtrak outfit do but whack its service.

Right now there are three coaches and two sleeping cars, plus a dining car, lounge-dorm and a baggage car on the passenger train that goes through here three times a week each way.

From midmonth until January the eight-car train is going to be cut to six cars. One sleeper and one coach are coming off for reasons unknown only to Amtrak.

Here we are faced with a period when traffic is likely to be the heaviest and Amtrak lops off a coach that will hold 44 passengers and a sleeper.

Not only is it almost impossible to get a reservation in these parts but those who made them up to four and five months ago are going to find no space available because of the reduced train size.

This time of year, especially with the energy crunch and its ramifications, Amtrak should be adding to the services it offers, not reducing them.

The reservations system is being silly enough as it is without adding further insult by a reduction in trains when an increasing number of people are seeking the service.

And if you don’t think the system has been (and still is somewhat) silly, talk to some of the people who know.

The system created a condition under which people in between Chicago and Seattle who wanted to make reservations couldn’t be assured of a seat or a place a few days in advance of the intended departure if they were going to have a place to put their body.

Railroaders claimed in practice a seat sold from Chicago to say Fargo was reported
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FILLI fill the way to Seattle. Amtrak records showed the space available when in fact it was open from Fargo on to any point west. Railroad men swear this to be the case even though Amtrak has a multi-million dollar reservation system. Reservations now are limited to trips of 300 miles or more, one-way, which means you can be seated on one from Missoula to Missoula, not from Miles City. This leaves, as a rule, a great many unreserved seats in the country's wasteland. If the glamos prevailed that would result in a lot of empty seats much of the way. The trains haven't been running empty much of the way because of human, not mechanical, ingenuity. Railroad men outsmart the computer by filling those empty seats with overflow from the unreserved coach. They knew in practice, if not in computer talk, that the seats would be available. They could sell 150 tickets for the 44-seat unreserved car without any feelings of guilt on reservations.

As for what happens, Whammy. Amtrak is going to take away two of the cars when they are needed the most and assure of being empty on the run. It doesn't make sense and it certainly isn't any way to run a railroad, at least not a passenger service.

Amtrak was founded, authorized by Congress, financed and highly touted as the way to save the passenger train through service. Cutting off cars when they will be needed the most isn't the exactly the recommended way to serve the public. If its officials are trying to put on a square play the last of the seasons has agreed that they need money or some other play, don't bother. The inbetween points, those not served by the airlines, are in much more need of service than the continental traveler. If Amtrak wants to serve its purpose, develop an efficient, useful public transportation system, it had better mend its ways.

IMPROVE TRAIN SERVICE

The jets are not flying out of Billings as often. And car travel may soon be severely restricted or rationed. It is time to get the trains running.

Sen. Mike Mansfield made that point last week in his impassioned plea for the immediate expansion of Amtrak services to all areas of the country. More specifically, he said, as has been his position for some time, that passenger service on Amtrak's southern route through Montana be expanded and that trains should run from Lake City to Missoula.

What Mansfield was trying to tell the federal bureaucracy is simply that Montana is a big state. And if we can not drive cars or fly as often we are going to need some way to cover the hundreds of miles from say Miles City to Missoula. More frequent train service would help bridge that transportation alternative.

Mansfield's urgings, however, may be falling on deaf ears. Far too all that has been heard from Amtrak are tales of woe from people who have had to wait weeks to get reservations only to find that they have been moved from the trains making even less rail space available.

We are behind you Mike. Keep shouting if you must and perhaps Amtrak officials can be alerted to the fact that we do want train service in Montana. This is an energy problem that makes sense to expand public transportation, especially when there is proven demand.

EDITORIAL BY DOC BOWLER

I know that what he says is true. On November 23, 1973, I called Amtrak for a reservation to leave here on the 23rd and return on December 23. The ticket agent took my reservation and said he would call me to confirm it when and if space was available. Last Friday, November 30, I called again to ask if there was a reservation for me and was told that there was no reservation and it didn't appear that there would be one unless Amtrak put on some extra cars. I did not know until Friday, November 30, that there were not enough cars and that Amtrak was undecided about whether it would do the bill coming to us shortly. Now I find out from Doc Bowler's editorial that Amtrak has actually taken off a couple of cars from its train.

The reason I asked for a train reservation is because frequently the weather is bad at that time and planes do not land in Butte or take off from Butte, and the roads could be covered with snow and/or ice so that it would be tough to drive.

I am certain that there are many more people who are in the same position that I am in. I think Doc Bowler's editorial comments that as yet there was no reservation and it didn't appear that there would be one unless Amtrak put on some extra cars. I did not know until Friday, November 30, that there were not enough cars and that Amtrak was undecided about whether it would do the bill coming to us shortly. Now I find out from Doc Bowler's editorial that Amtrak has actually taken off a couple of cars from its train.

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