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Questions abound over second daily Pennsylvanian train

By Colin McNickle

There's lots of happy talk surrounding next month's return of a second daily Amtrak Pennsylvanian passenger train that will run between Pittsburgh, Harrisburg and New York City.

Keystone State residents will get the train service they deserve, goes one line of chit-chat. It will promote tourism in Pennsylvania, if not general economic development, goes another. Still others cite the simple convenience of having that second daily Pennsylvanian in service.

And then there's the rationale that the addition somehow cements Pennsylvania's reputation as the train capital of the United States.

But a researcher at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy says obvious questions are not being broached or answered.

"Is the addition of a [second] daily service from Pittsburgh warranted by demand and how long will it take to reap the economic benefits to justify the \$220 million spent to make the needed improvements on the railroad as required by [track owner] Norfolk Southern as a condition for the second running of the *Pennsylvanian*?" asks Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank.

"And, most importantly," ask the Ph.D. economist (in *Policy Brief Vol. 26, No. 38*), "how many future passengers that would have used the existing service will choose to travel on the new line, thereby splitting up passengers between the two?"

Never mind that while the multimillion-dollar improvements will benefit Norfolk Southern greatly, they will do *nothing* to improve passenger train travel times. In fact, the latest Amtrak schedule shows travel times will be slightly *slower* than before.

And Haulk has other questions.

“Indeed, where is the forecast of ridership on the second *Pennsylvanian* train from Pittsburgh across the commonwealth?

“And how much economic benefit is there per person riding the train as opposed to riding in automobiles?” One can save about two hours of travel time from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg and from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia by driving versus taking the *Pennsylvanian*.

Of course, Amtrak “certainly is not a substitute for people who fly in light of the time it takes to get to Philadelphia or New York from Pittsburgh by train,” he reminds.

“Further, what are the societal or potential environmental benefits?” Haulk asks. “Are there available studies that address those issues?”

Simply put, the think tank scholar says taxpayers who will be paying for the “needed” improvements and the subsidy to Amtrak necessary to operate the second train—especially if the passenger demand is far below levels to cover operating costs of a second train—deserve to know the details.

“While a second train sounds good, there ought to be substantial publicly announced research to show prospective ridership over and above the numbers on the existing service and the expenditures necessary to prepare for and operate a second *Pennsylvanian*.”

Haulk, citing U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics numbers, notes that in 2025, Pittsburgh’s Downtown Amtrak station saw an increase in boarding and disembarking passengers to a recent high of 141,146. But that’s still below the 10-year-ago 2015 count of 149,587.

“Build it and they will come is not the basis of sound public policy,” Halk concludes.

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