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Without federal aid, Amtrak could leave rural areas behind

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BY CURTIS TATE

Star-Telegram Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — They're among the last holdovers from the golden age of American train travel, but the changing relationship between the federal government and the states could mean the end of the line for some of Amtrak's long-distance routes.

States, including Texas, have shown they're willing to pay for popular Amtrak corridors within their borders, but it's less than certain that they could assume responsibility for more than a dozen cross-country trains that date to the creation of Amtrak by Congress in 1970.

Passenger trains have been stopping in Hutchinson, Kan., since the early 1870s. But the agricultural center of 42,000 is in danger of losing the one that still stops there every day.

"The bottom line is when you have something, and you've had it for so long and it's served so many people, you hate to lose it," said Hutchinson City Manager John Deardoff.

To critics, Amtrak's long-distance trains don't reflect the way Americans travel today. They carry the fewest passengers and lose the most money, funds that could be spent elsewhere, such as Amtrak's heavily traveled Northeast Corridor.

In a May hearing, Rep. Jeff Denham, a California Republican and chairman of the railroads subcommittee in the House of Representatives, noted that Amtrak's long-distance routes lost a combined \$600 million in 2012.

"We simply cannot afford to continue these levels of subsidized losses year after year," Denham said.



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highways. They help travelers bypass airport security and traffic jams. They're more accessible to the elderly and disabled.

"People appreciate the range of travel alternatives an integrated national system can offer," Amtrak president and CEO Joseph Boardman said in testimony at the May hearing.

Serving small towns

One of those trains is the Southwest Chief, which clicks off 2,265 miles between Chicago and Los Angeles. With the exception of Kansas City, Mo., Topeka, Kan., and Albuquerque, N.M., the backdrop is mostly prairie, mountains and desert. But the train also serves dozens of small towns, including several in western Kansas.

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"If you look at these small communities," Boardman said in an October conference call with reporters, "they depend on Amtrak being accessible."

The Southwest Chief calls in Hutchinson in the middle of the night, and the station ranks pretty far down the list in annual boardings. The city has highways and an airport. Still, Deardoff, the city manager, said, it's a valued link.

But neither federal nor state funding may be available to sustain long-distance service.

The train travels a historic route across western Kansas that needs millions of dollars in repairs. BNSF Railway, one of North America's largest freight rail companies, owns the line but uses it sparingly. If Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico can't come up with roughly \$100 million in the next few years, the train will have to find another track.

"Our difficulty is in getting the three states to come to the table," Deardoff said. "That's not been promising."

DFW market is strong

Amtrak carried more than 31 million passengers in the most recent fiscal year — a record, but still nowhere near 600 million domestic airline passengers.

Three times as many passengers boarded short-distance trains as did they did longer routes. But the longer routes actually cost more to operate.

Amtrak has received more than \$40 billion in more than 40 years. Republicans in the House of Representatives have repeatedly tried to end its federal subsidies, which would basically pull the plug on the long-distance trains. They've gained some odd company in the Brookings Institution, a center-left Washington policy group, which called for states to subsidize their long-distance trains if they considered them essential.

In mid-October, Indiana became the last of 18 states to agree to pick up most of the cost to operate trains on routes of 750 miles or fewer, as required by a law Congress passed in 2008. Texas and Oklahoma, both of which paid Amtrak \$8.7 million from 2007-2011, continue to partner with Amtrak for the operation of the short-distance Heartland Express, which runs between Fort Worth and Oklahoma City.

The Heartland Express is one of three Amtrak trains that currently run daily out of Fort Worth, along with two legs of the Texas Eagle.

According to report earlier this year from Brookings, Dallas-Fort Worth is the second-fastest-growing market for Amtrak, behind Phoenix. Ridership in Dallas-Fort Worth was 201,996 in 2012, up from 34,651 — or 483 percent — from 1997.

But states are increasingly taking on infrastructure costs they once counted on Washington to cover, whether it's funding for highway construction or port improvements. They might not have much more room in their budgets.

And as some states and cities have discovered, once you lose a train, it's even more expensive to get it back.

Wichita, Kan., lost Amtrak service during the Carter administration. This past year, the city applied for a \$12 million federal Department of Transportation grant to conduct environmental studies and design work to extend the Heartland Flyer, from Fort Worth and Oklahoma City to Wichita and ultimately Kansas City. The application wasn't approved.

A string of Kansas communities, including Hutchinson, applied for a similar \$15 million grant to fix up the track used by the Southwest Chief. Their effort faltered, too.

'We don't want to move'

Hutchinson's loss could be Wichita's gain. One alternate route for the Southwest Chief would bring the train through Wichita and Amarillo. But that route, also owned by BNSF, has become a primary freight artery between the ports in Southern California and the Midwest. Amtrak would compete for increasingly limited space.

One notable group of passengers would be affected if the Southwest Chief gets diverted: The Boy Scouts of America. Thousands of scouts ride the train every year to camp at the Philmont Ranch in northern New Mexico.

Amtrak's Boardman told a group of reporters in October that he'd prefer to keep the train on its current route.

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"We don't want to move," he said. "We expect to stay where we are."

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