

Passenger train routes may be cut

By Dan McLean, Free Press Staff Writer • December 5, 2008

Despite increasing ridership, budget shortfalls might force cutbacks or an elimination of some Amtrak routes in Vermont within the next few months.

"As our budget deficit grows, it does increase the pressure to find ways to deal with that — which will accelerate all conversations," Agency of Transportation spokesman John Zicconi said, referring to possible Amtrak service cuts in Vermont.

Each year the state provides a nearly \$5 million subsidy to operate Amtrak's two Vermont lines: The Vermonter, which runs between St. Albans and Washington, D.C., and the Ethan Allen Express, which runs between Rutland to New York City.

Several scenarios of cutbacks are being considered, Zicconi said, including eliminating one of the two lines or shortening the Vermonter's route. The shortened route would eliminate service from St. Albans to White River Junction — cutting out stops, including those in Essex Junction, Waterbury, Montpelier and Randolph.

"We will not make any significant cuts or changes to service without seeking at least legislative input, if not legislative approval," Zicconi said.

Senate Transportation Chairman Richard Mazza, D-Chittenden/Grand Isle, said he didn't see how a cut could be made in the current budget year because the state signed a contract with Amtrak. "We have already committed for the year," Mazza said. "We will be talking about the next contract."

Mazza agreed that the Legislature would need to be involved in any decision about reducing or eliminating passenger train service. "It is a major decision."

Rail cuts have come up because the Agency of Transportation must pare at least \$21 million in spending from its budget, Zicconi said, adding that the figure could be several million dollars higher in a month.

"We understand the state's need to make an evaluation and will be waiting to hear their decision on continued funding of their Amtrak service," Amtrak spokesman Cliff Cole said.

The cost-saving measures could be implemented in the next few months, Zicconi said.

Each year, the Ethan Allen Express costs the state \$1.5 million, and the Vermonter costs \$3.4 million, Zicconi said.

In the 12 months that ended in September[dbm: 2008:], 62,902 passengers traveled to or from

the Vermonter's nine Vermont stations, compared with 19,314 who traveled on the Ethan Allen Express's two stations in southern Vermont, according to Amtrak data.

"The Vermonter services more Vermonters because it has all those stops along the spine of the state," Zicconi said.

The Ethan Allen Express and the Vermonter saw ridership rise by about 17 percent in October, compared with October 2007.

"We don't want to cut Amtrak because the service is growing, and it's a time when people are looking to get out of their single-occupancy vehicle, but with the budget where it is, it has to be on the table," Zicconi said.

Ross Capon, president of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, a Washington, D.C.-based passenger train advocacy group, was dismayed to learn Amtrak service in Vermont might be curtailed.

Cutting service is the wrong thing to do when ridership is increasing, he said. He also questioned how much money could be saved by shortening the Vermonter route because the same number of locomotives would likely remain in service.

The next round of federal stimulus packages being considered includes about \$500 million for passenger rail service, he said. Capon expects the total package to be worth hundreds of billions of dollars and thinks the nation's rail service should receive a \$2 billion to \$10 billion infusion.

"President-elect [Obama](#) was elected on a message of 'change.' If change means anything in transportation, it means figuring how to give people more service, not less," he said.

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