



Amtrak, North Atlantic Rail Alliance Seek Support for Passenger Rail Proposals

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Two organizations have recently released multi-year, multi-billion dollar proposals for investment in intercity passenger rail. One, the federally owned passenger railroad Amtrak, seeks roughly \$75 billion to add or initiate service on dozens of routes across the country by 2035. The other, the private North Atlantic Rail Alliance, would spend an estimated \$105 billion to construct a new high-speed rail alternative to the existing Northeast Corridor (NEC) line from New York to Boston, plus new or upgraded branch lines. Both organizations have requested various measures supportive of their plans to be included in federal legislation. Some of these—though not all—were included in bills passed by the House (H.R. 3684, the INVEST in America Act) and marked up in the Senate (S. 2016, the Surface Transportation Investment Act).

ConnectsUS 2035

Amtrak's proposal, ConnectsUS 2035, identifies some 40 potential new routes and another 20 or so existing routes that would receive improved service, such as additional trains per day or faster scheduled trip times. All of these routes would be located off the NEC (at least in part) and be less than 750 miles in length, meaning each would be subject to a cost-sharing requirement between Amtrak and the states served. However, a key element of the proposal would allow Amtrak to offset required state contributions with federal funds for the first few years of operation, incentivizing states to sign on. Importantly, all final route alignments, schedules, speeds, and service levels would be jointly determined by Amtrak, state partners, and the freight railroads that host Amtrak's trains outside the NEC; Amtrak could not implement any of the proposed changes unilaterally.

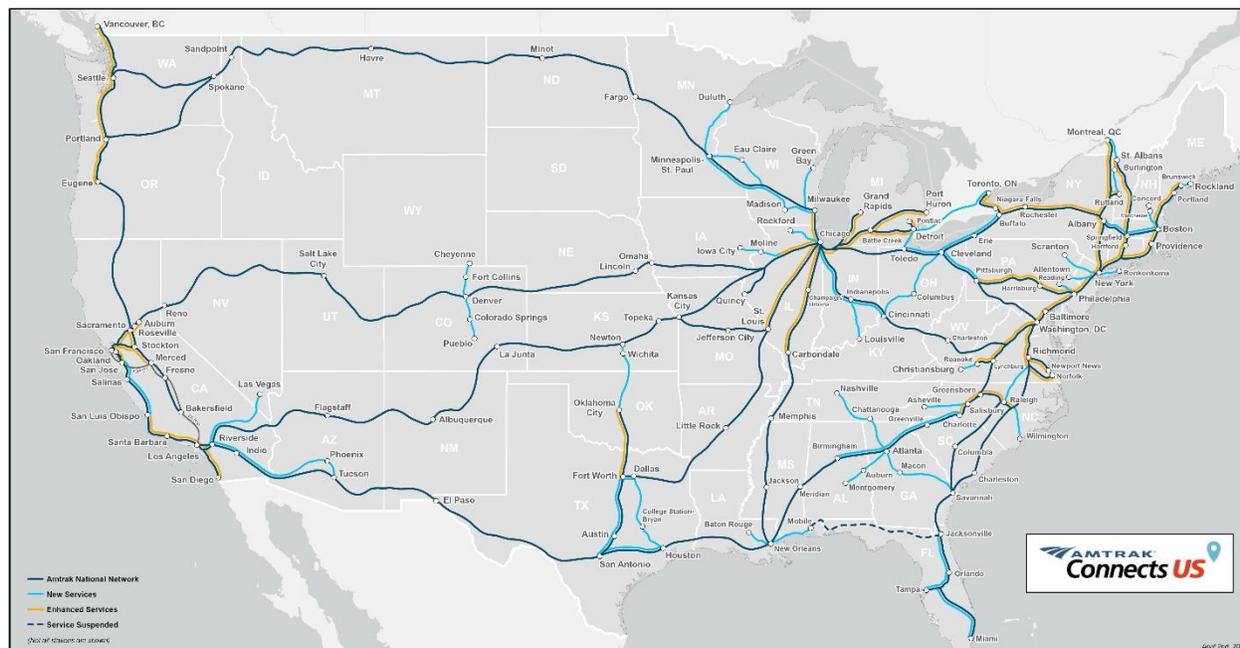
Many changes Amtrak proposes are drawn from existing regional rail or corridor plans. Some, such as extensions of current service in Vermont or Virginia, already enjoy strong support and are likely to proceed. Others, such as improved service between Albany and Buffalo, NY, have been studied but not implemented, in part because of the high estimated cost of the work required to allow higher speeds. Still others, such as establishing service between Atlanta and Nashville, have not been studied in detail. Amtrak has said it conducted its own basic ridership and revenue modeling exercise for each of the proposed changes, but detailed results of its analysis have not been made public.

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Figure I. Amtrak ConnectsUS Map



Source: Amtrak, <https://www.amtrakconnectsus.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Amtrak-Connects-US-Fact-Sheet-2021-04-16-1.pdf>. ConnectsUS 2035 contains no elements located in Alaska or Hawaii.

Amtrak has estimated that its proposal would require an investment of \$5 billion per year over 15 years (\$75 billion). H.R. 3684 and S. 2016 would each authorize an amount of funding for Amtrak’s National Network—its routes outside the NEC—that is well short of what Amtrak says is needed to implement ConnectsUS 2035. However, both bills would authorize an increase in funding for new or existing discretionary grant programs, which could be used to fund infrastructure improvements required to implement specific proposals in ConnectsUS 2035. The bills also include a provision requested by Amtrak allowing federal funds to offset state contributions for new lines.

Amtrak’s proposal recommends an accelerated process for settling track access disputes with host railroads, and the right to sue host railroads in federal court for interfering with passenger traffic, both of which are included in H.R. 3684 but not the Senate bill. Amtrak also recommends the creation of a dedicated trust fund for passenger rail expenditures, arguing it would insulate complex multi-year projects from the uncertainties of the annual appropriations process. Neither bill would create such a trust fund, but the House bill specifies which funding authorizations would be drawn from a trust fund should one be created; other bills that would create a rail trust fund have been introduced in the House (H.R. 2769) and Senate (S. 899). To date, none of the proposals specifies how money from a passenger rail trust fund would be distributed, other than making it available for discretionary grant programs.

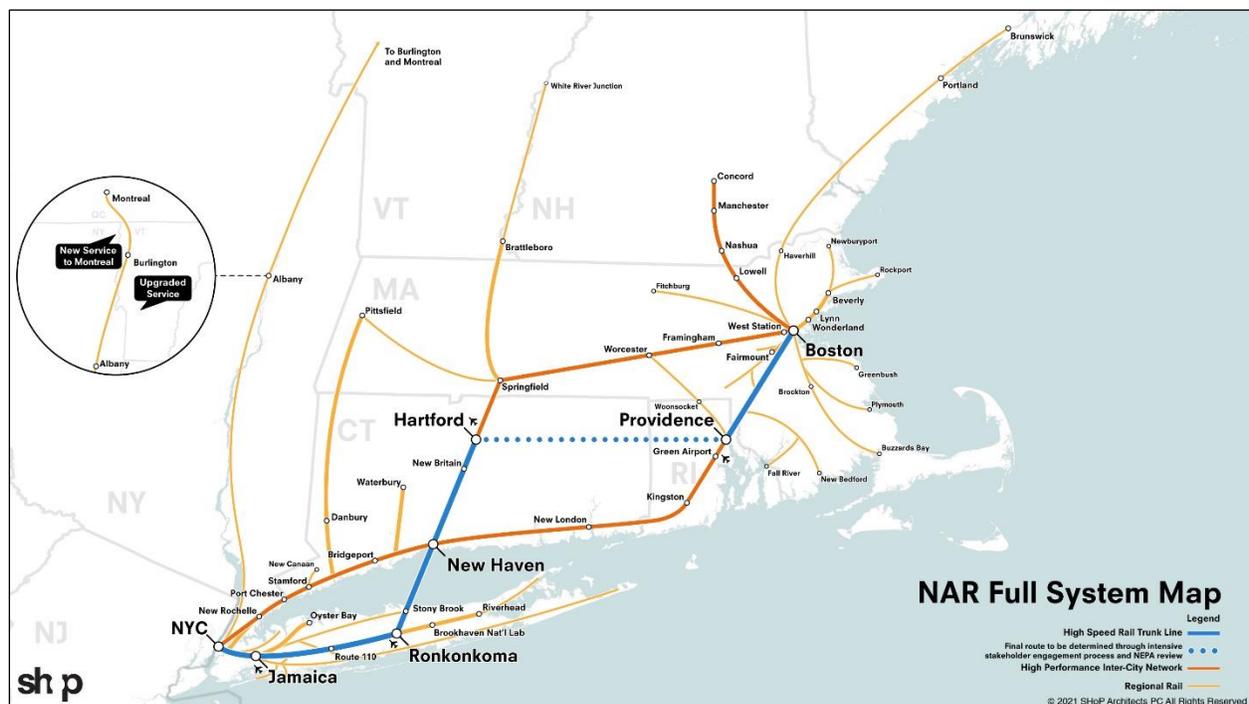
North Atlantic Rail

North Atlantic Rail (NAR), an independent initiative led by current and former transportation professionals and state and local officials, has proposed building a new rail line that would link New York City and Boston in one hour 40 minutes, cutting two hours off Amtrak’s fastest trips between those two cities today. NAR proposes to bypass the existing NEC by building a new high-speed route that would go from New York City to Long Island, then through a tunnel beneath Long Island Sound to Connecticut, then inland via Hartford to Providence, RI, where it would rejoin the NEC on new parallel tracks. NAR also envisions upgrades to connecting Amtrak routes and commuter rail lines. Some of the improvements

contemplated by NAR, such as new rail service between Boston and Concord, NH, also appear as part of Amtrak's ConnectsUS 2035 vision (**Figure 2**). Though more limited in geographic scope, NAR recommends electrifying many passenger rail lines in the Northeast and building a rail tunnel underneath downtown Boston. Neither of those proposals is included in ConnectsUS 2035.

NAR has estimated that its plan would cost approximately \$105 billion to construct. (Other plans have identified lower-cost projects for more modest time savings.) It has offered a roughly 20-year timetable for completion, but has identified a roughly \$24 billion suite of “early action projects.” As part of its early action plan, NAR requested that Congress create a new entity, the North Atlantic Rail Corporation, which could serve as a project sponsor eligible to begin the engineering and design work for the high-speed line and tunnel. On June 2, over 20 House Members signed [a letter to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee](#) asking it to enact language creating this entity. The House bill, as passed, would create a North Atlantic Rail Interstate Compact and not an independent corporation (the Senate bill, as reported, does neither), but the discretionary planning and capital grant programs the bills would create might be available to advance individual components of the plan.

Figure 2. North Atlantic Rail Map



Source: North Atlantic Rail, <https://northatlanticrail.org/maps>.

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