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FRIDAY HOTLINE

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JANUARY 23RD, 2026



Tell Us Your Story

Association News

Analysis of FY 2026 THUD Rail Funding and Provisions

[by Sean Jeans-Gail | VP of Gov't Affairs + Policy](#)

A transportation funding agreement [released jointly by the U.S. House and Senate Appropriations Committees this earlier week](#) passed the House last night as part of a three bill “minibus”. The bill, which was advanced by a bipartisan vote of 341 yeas to 88 nays, provides a unified funding framework for Fiscal Year 2026 transportation programs, including a strong funding commitment to Amtrak and passenger rail programs.

The agreement represents a compromise between the differing House and Senate approaches first advanced in Summer 2025, a clear sign that there is little appetite for another extended showdown after the prolonged 43-day government shutdown that took place late in October and November of 2025.

And while there are some disappointing elements—including reductions to funding for important transit programs—the bill ultimately delivers for Amtrak operations and the advanced appropriations included in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA).

Last night's passage by the House tees up Senate action next week, which would allow for final passage ahead of the January 30th funding deadline.

[\[CLICK HERE TO READ SEAN'S FULL ASSESSMENT, INCLUDING FUNDING, POLICY, AND GRANT PROGRAMS\]](#)

Why the STB Hit the ‘Reset’ Button on the UP-NS Merger

[by Jim Mathews / President & CEO](#)

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This piece was originally posted on our website on 1/17, well after last week's Hotline went to "print". We wanted to make sure everyone saw it this time around - Joe)

Late Friday, the Surface Transportation Board [rejected Union Pacific's application to acquire Norfolk Southern](#). That headline alone has already led to a lot of speculation — about politics, about timing, about whether the Board is “for” or “against” large rail mergers.

The reality is both more technical and more consequential.

This was not a ruling on the merits of the merger. The Board didn't say the transaction is good or bad, pro-competitive or anti-competitive. What it did say, very clearly, is that the application as filed did not meet the Board's basic requirements for completeness, and that under federal law, an incomplete application must be rejected.

Even so, laced throughout the language in this procedural decision is a very

important message about how STB will evaluate this, or any future, Class I merger.

Remember, at this stage of the proceeding neither the arguments nor the STB's ruling was supposed to be about the merits of the deal. This decision was about completeness, not outcome.

The Board identified three independent reasons the application could not proceed:

1. The applicants did not provide forward-looking market share projections, even though they repeatedly claimed the merger would lead to substantial traffic growth over several years.
2. The applicants did not submit the complete merger agreement, including key schedules that define how much regulatory burden Union Pacific is willing to accept before it can walk away from the deal.
3. A related application involving control of the Terminal Railroad Association of St. Louis was misclassified, which by itself made the broader filing incomplete.

Any one of these would have been enough to stop the clock. Together, they left the Board with no discretion under the statute.

One of the most important, and maybe most misunderstood, parts of the decision concerns market share analysis. The applicants argued that their competitive impacts could be evaluated by simply adding together Union Pacific's and Norfolk Southern's existing market shares. The Board disagreed.

Why? Because elsewhere in the application, the railroads made very different claims: that the merger would divert traffic from trucks and other railroads, that volumes would grow substantially, and that it would take several years after the merger closes for those effects to fully materialize.

You can't have it both ways.

[\[TO CONTINUE WITH JIM'S THOUGHTS ON THE STB'S RULING, CLICK HERE\]](#)

Field Notes

Overnight Sleeper Train Opens in Eastern India

By Philip Mayer, Association Volunteer & Hotline Contributor

A new semi-high speed, long distance, sleeper rail line opened in eastern India this month, bringing more convenient and comfortable travel options to the region.

The "Vande Bharat Sleeper" runs approximately 966 kilometers between the city Howrah Junction of the state of West Bengal and Kamakhya Junction of the state of Assam. Assam lies in North Eastern India, a region of eight states bounded by the Himalaya Mountains, and the nations of China, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The isolated region of North Eastern India is particularly in need of transportation links as it is connected to the rest of India by the Siliguri Corridor, a stretch of land nicknamed "The Chicken's Neck" because it is only 22 kilometers wide.

Each one-way trip takes about 14 hours with 13 stops between the two termini including the key stops of: Malda Town, New Jalpaiguri, New Cooch Behar, and New Alipurduar. This is a much faster journey than the previous train service, which took 16 hours and 23 minutes.

Indian Railways, who runs the VBH, announced that the first commercial runs of the train sold out within 24 hours. The rail line began service on January 22.

The opening of the rail line was eagerly awaited. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagged off a preliminary test journey of the VBS from Malda town in West Bengal on January 17. The region's first sleeper train is fully air-conditioned and can reach a top speed of 160 km per hour, or 99 mph. Other amenities include: improved sleeping berths, onboard information systems, CCTV surveillance, bio-vacuum toilets, and facilities for people with disabilities.

The Vande Bharat Sleeper is expected to boost the region's economy while providing faster, smoother, more comfortable, and more convenient travel options in the region.

Please email [Joe Aiello](#) if you have any local, state or regional stories/projects (even something you know or experienced happening overseas) that you would like to write about and see highlighted in the Hotline.

Calling All Readers!

Do you have a favorite transit/train photo (or photos) you have taken from your travels around the country, or even around the world? Would you like to see them featured in our Hotline social media post each week (with credit, of course)?

Send them to Joe Aiello @ jaiello@narprail.org with the subject "HOTLINE PHOTO"

Hotline Links

A curated selection of passenger rail and transportation stories from this week. Check out our social media feeds to read breaking news and join the conversation!

['Punched in the Face' by a Rail Disaster, an Ohio Town Fights Its Way Back](#), NYT (gift article)

It's been three years since the Norfolk Southern derailment in East Palestine, OH and residents, and local economy, are still trying to pick up the pieces - including closed businesses and unfulfilled promises.

[Amtrak announces weather cancellations](#), Channel 3000

Changes to the Empire Builder and Borealis schedule for the next few days as temps will drop to -60 in some places along the route.

[Toll of Commuting: Portal Bridge construction to disrupt NJ Transit, Amtrak commuters](#), NJ News 12

The replacement for the 111-year-old Portal Bridge over the Hackensack River is nearly complete, but commuters will have to brace for disruptions over the next four weeks as crews begin the transition from old to new.

[Sens. Duckworth, Hoeven introduce bill to protect passenger-rail crews](#), Progressive Railroaders

It seems like a pretty obvious idea that passenger rail staff would have the same federal protections as their airline counterparts, but that is not the case at all. Sens. Duckworth (D-IL) and Hoeven (R-ND) are hoping to finally get them on equal footing

[Proposed overhaul at Jamaica station comes as Queens area reckons with housing boom](#), Gothamist

The 3rd busiest station in the NYC system hasn't seen an upgrade in over two decades, but thanks to a comprehensive rezoning plan and \$50M from the Governor's executive budget - it's time for a new coat of paint (and a whole lot more) for the Jamaica hub.

[CRRC will lay off workers because U.S. customs still blocking car shells from China](#), Masslive

CRRC, the Chinese owned plant based in Western MA, has sent a 60-day notice to 161 workers (40% of the workforce) due to the car shells being held up at the Port of Philadelphia since May. CRRC makes subway cars for both Boston's MBTA and the LA Metro.

[California investing \\$202 million to expand cleaner transportation options in communities most affected by pollution](#), Caltrans

Part of the overall Low Carbon Transit Operation Program, which has funded over 1,500 projects since 2014, Caltrans is awarding \$202M for an additional 143 transportation projects - including LA Metro, MUNI in the Bay Area, and San Diego's MTS.

[Brightline West now aims for completion in late 2029](#), Trains

For the second time since the company broke ground in 2024, Brightline West is pushing back the opening of their 218-mile route between Vegas and Rancho Cucamonga, CA.

[Brightline defers another bond interest payment](#), Trains

An update to a story we covered last week. As expected, Brightline missed their payment deadline last Thursday (the second time they have done so, the first being last July) and could end up defaulting if they have to defer a third time.

[An ode to the train system](#), The Cavalier Daily

Writer and UVA student Victoria Parage-Riboul gives a peek into her "contentious relationship" with Amtrak as a regular weekend rider between

[CSX removes Chicago diamond crossing to improve rail traffic flow, Progressive Railroading](#)

Part of the larger 75th Street Corridor Improvement Project (which includes the brand-new flyover that we covered last year), the over a century old Forest Hill rail diamond crossing has officially been removed by CSX.



**WE ARE WORKING ON A DISCORD SERVER.
STAY TUNED FOR MORE INFORMATION**

If you aren't following Rail Passengers on social media, you should be!
We are covering all the breaking news America's passengers need to stay informed on local, regional, and national issues.

Upcoming Events

Advocacy Workshops + Council Business Meeting



**RAIL PASSENGERS
ASSOCIATION**

2026 DC WORKSHOPS + Days on the Hill

April 20th - April 24th, 2026
Rail Passengers Office
1200 G St NW, Suite 520

[DC ADVOCACY WORKSHOPS REGISTRATION](#)

Registration is \$125.00

Due to the space limitations of our office, each of the sessions is **limited to 20 tickets** and there will be no on-site or virtual registration. Please attend the session for the state you reside in. **Registration ends at Midnight eastern on Friday, April 10th.**

The in-office workshops will run from 8:00a to 4:00p. Lunch will be provided (*attendees are responsible for their own breakfast*). Attendees will be responsible for securing their own lodging needs.

Stay tuned to www.railpassengers.org/dc2026 for more information.



**RAIL PASSENGERS
ASSOCIATION**

2026 SPRING COUNCIL BUSINESS MEETING

April 22nd, 2026
Open Gov Hub
1100 13th Street NW, Suite 800

[2026 SPRING COUNCIL BUSINESS MEETING REGISTRATION](#)

**In-person registration is \$99
Virtual registration is free**

The 2026 Spring Council Business Meeting will take place on Wednesday, April 22nd from 8:00a to 4:00p. Lunch will be provided (*attendees are responsible for their own breakfast*). Registration ends on Friday, April 10th

Stay tuned to www.railpassengers.org/2026SpringCouncilMeeting for more information.

Please contact Joe Aiello (jaiello@narprail.org) to have a local, state or regional meeting added to the Rail Passengers calendar (print and on-line) of upcoming events!

Staff Updates

Your staff is at the table, in the field, having the conversations that make a difference for passengers across the country. Learn what they're up to each week and how you can support your Association's key missions!

- **Jim Mathews, President & CEO**, spent the week developing an analytical and litigation strategy for the Association and allies on Union Pacific's proposed takeover of Norfolk Southern, meeting with congressional staff, and working with Amtrak leadership on issues relating to fleet and service improvements. He also hosted an onboarding event for the first cohort of 18 volunteer members of the Association Professional Staff, who have hit the ground running!
- **Sean Jeans-Gail, Vice President of Policy**, was out for most of the week, then jumped back in head-first to [analyze the FY26 Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development bicameral funding agreement](#) and confer with allied stakeholder groups on [the STB's recent decision regarding the UPNS merger application filing](#).
- **Jonsie Stone, Chief of Staff**, processed membership dues and donations sent to the DC office, created email solicitations for the coming months, and tended to the administrative and operational needs of the Association.
- **Joe Aiello, Director of Community Engagement & Organizing**, took part in an orientation for our new volunteer staff, continued early planning for the fall meeting and our site visit coming up next month, as well as outreach for our ongoing council election.
- **Kimberly Notarianni, Membership Management Consultant**, continues to work closely with our members to assist with account access, username retrieval, password resets, and the addition of sub-memberships for qualifying membership levels. Members with a Family membership or higher are reminded that each sub-member is assigned their own unique member ID number. The Head of Household's ID number is not a shared or blanket number and cannot be used on behalf of other family members.

Apply for Volunteer Staff at Rail Passengers Association

**VOLUNTEERS
NEEDED**



RAIL PASSENGERS
ASSOCIATION

railpassengers.org/volunteer

Rail Passengers Association

[CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE!](#)

Membership How-To

Are you a current member and need help with your account number, username, etc.?

[Click Here For Our Membership "How-To" Page](#)

We Have Merch!

New items available!



Rail Passengers Timetables



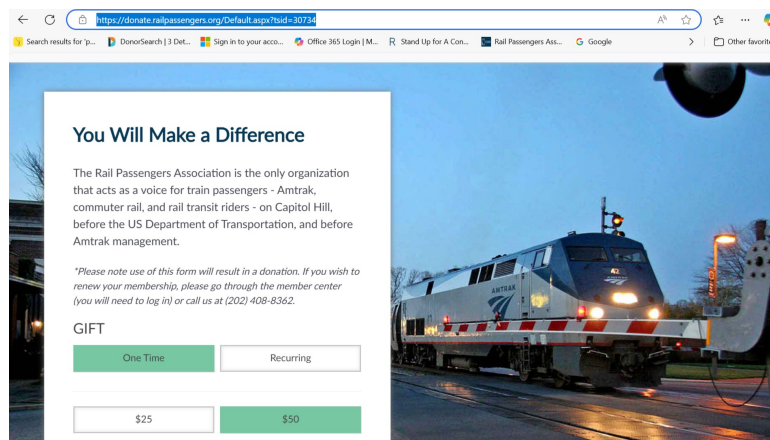
Thanks to a collaborative effort between Rail Passengers NYS Council Member Nathanael Nerode & juckins.net's Chris Juckins, we have been able to completely update our timetables resource page.

[CLICK HERE](http://railpassengers.org/timetables)

NOTE: Because we do update the links on our website - please bookmark the **main page** and not the individual schedules

Donate Online with Confidence

You can donate to the Rail Passengers Association online with confidence, knowing your credit card information is secure. Charity Engine uses industry-standard SSL technology to keep your information secure. Don't wait for a paper appeal to donate, support the Association today by donating here. When the web browser shows a lock next to the URL, it means that it's an HTTPS, and it's secure:
<https://donate.railpassengers.org/Default.aspx?tsid=30734>



Do more with your donations. If you have questions about employer match, gifting a membership, or other questions about how to make a bigger impact, let us know! Your staff is here to help with:

- Online Donations
- Donor Advised Funds
- Employer Match
- RPA Signature Visa Card
- Gift of Membership
- and More!

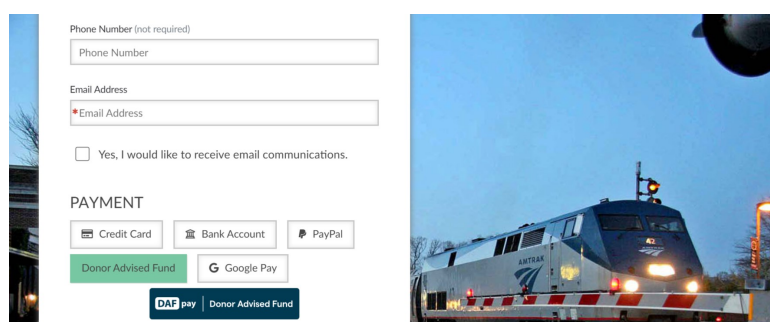
With multiple secure, protected methods of payment, you have more flexibility in the way dues are paid. Skip the hassle and [contact us](#) today for help setting up automatic or online payments.

- Setup ACH or E-Check with your bank of choice
- Use a Debit or Credit Card to pay online, or
- Send a check to 1200 G Street NW Suite 520 Washington, DC 20005

Use Your Donor Advised Fund (DAF) to Donate, Renew or Join Online

You can now donate or join/renew your membership, online, through your donor advised fund using DAFpay. All Rail Passengers forms now include a "Donor Advised Fund" button under Payment.

Donation Form:





Membership Form:


☐ Rail Passengers' Webinar Series


☐ Other

☐ Yes, I prefer communication by email rather than by mail.

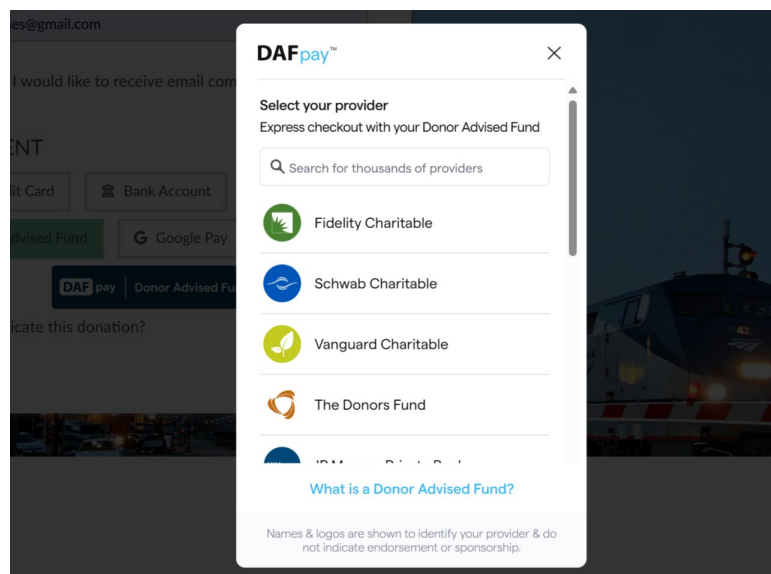
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After selecting Donor Advised Fund as your payment preference, you will be taken to a DAFpay screen to select your donor advised fund provider, ie., Fidelity Charitable, Vanguard Charitable, Daffy, etc.



Select your provider, then follow their prompts. If you need to provide information on Rail Passengers Association, please use the below:

National Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc.
dba Rail Passengers Association
1200 G Street, NW
Suite 520
Washington, DC 20005
Contact: Jonsie Stone, jstone@narprail.org
Tax ID: 36-2615221

Member & Donor Notices

- **The Rail Passengers Association is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. Our federal tax identification number is 36-2615221**
- **To help facilitate dissemination of electronic thank you receipts,** please make sure your contact information, **specifically your email address**, is up-to-date in your Neon profile.
- **If you need assistance with your membership,** please call the Office at 202-408-8362.
- **While our staff continues to work remotely, we are unable to provide permanent membership cards.** You can print a temporary membership card by creating an account at www.railpassengers.org (select "My Account" on the homepage).
- **Complete all information!** -- Before sealing your envelope, PLEASE double-check the credit card information on the buck slip!
 - Print credit card information clearly.
 - **Include an expiration date, month and year, as well as the CVV number.**
 - Without **COMPLETE** information, your membership renewal or donation can't be processed.

- **If you have your financial institution send a check on your behalf,** without a buckslip, PLEASE instruct them to add:
 - a notation in the memo field if the payment is for membership dues or a donation, AND,
 - your Rail Passengers Association member ID. If we have multiple members with the same name, i.e., John Smith, it can be hard to identify the correct member to attribute the payment, without the member ID.



Rail Passengers Association members have access to a full service, nationwide federal credit union with extensive product and service offerings. Signature FCU is the exclusive provider of the [Rail Passengers Association-branded Visa credit card](#) with our logo, which supports our work by giving back to our organization, and gives you 1 point for every \$1 you spend to redeem for travel and merchandise. The card has no annual fee, no balance transfer fees, no foreign transaction fees, and has a very low interest rate.

Charity 
Navigator

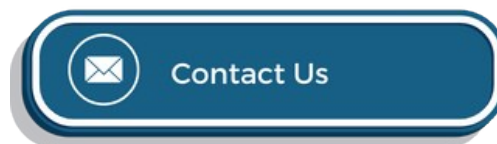


★ FOUR-STAR ★

Rail Passengers Association Earns Coveted 4-Star Rating from Charity Navigator

Rail Passengers Association's strong financial health and commitment to accountability and transparency have earned it a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, America's largest independent charity evaluator. Our Charity Navigator profile can be found by clicking [here](#).

If you have questions, feedback, or submissions for next week's hotline, send us your thoughts! Help us spread the word about your local, regional, and national passenger rail wins.



THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS:



RAIL PASSENGERS

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