

## Chief at crossroads: Train enthusiasts fear end of Amtrak service in Northern New Mexico

By Julie Ann Grimm | The New Mexican

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Photo by: Clyde Mueller/The New Mexican

Twice a day, Amtrak's Southwest Chief pulls into the sleepy railroad depot in Lamy, N.M. The rest of the day, the station, part of the transportation network that links Northern New Mexico to the rest of the country, is deserted.

One afternoon in February, Mary Lee Moses was waiting for the train to Chicago, and then on to New York. She's made the cross-country trip between New Mexico and her home in Lafayette, N.Y., enough times to know how to do it right. She takes blankets and a pillow, picks a good seat, has a plan.

"We do crosswords," said Moses, who always travels with at least one grandchild in tow. "We go to the lounge car, and we watch the sights. We keep busy. It seems to go by pretty fast."

This year, she made her fourth round trip by train to visit her son, Karl, who came to Santa Fe to attend the Institute of American Indian Arts. When he was in school, he rode the Amtrak home to New York about half a dozen times. Now New Mexico is home to him, and she is doing the riding.

Moses, her son and grandchildren are among more than 12,500 passengers who got on or off Amtrak's Southwest Chief at the Lamy depot during the last federal fiscal year, and among the nearly 125,000 passengers to board or disembark the Chief in New Mexico during that time.

Now insiders are suggesting those passengers might eventually have to use other transportation. Some fear rail service on the Southwest Chief is in jeopardy, all the way from Raton to Albuquerque, because some sections of track are in disrepair -- and because of questions about whether the state government can get out of an agreement to buy 200 miles of the railroad line.

Others are suggesting that a track across Southern New Mexico might be a better choice for Amtrak's Chicago-Los Angeles route.

### Railroading fans

Mary Lee Moses and her granddaughter, Aubrey, will get to the end of the line in Chicago in 26 hours, then switch to the train heading for New York -- another 20 hours. Compared to the cost of hotel rooms and the stress of making a days-long car trip or an airplane ride with connecting flights, she says time on the train is a better choice for her.

The kids start to get restless as the minutes tick by inside the small Lamy station. A ticket agent sits at a counter behind metal bars, and wooden benches bear the scratches of several generations. Six of the seven wooden window sills are lined with books, free for the taking.

On one wall, a bumper sticker is taped to a sheet of paper. "Maybe your next flight should be on a train. All aboard Amtrak."

Mary Lee Moses will second that. She's not keen on air travel.

For that and other reasons, keeping transportation choices available to get in and out of New Mexico means a lot to her son, Karl Moses.

"My mom is comfortable on the train. She's not comfortable flying," he said while the family waited at the side of the track for a final goodbye. "I'd rather have her be comfortable and be able to spend time with her and have her be rested."

Losing that option wouldn't make him happy, he said.

Train advocate Ford Robbins feels the same way. He has been following the saga of the Southwest Chief for years. He's the kind of guy who gets *Trains* magazine delivered to his house. He rides trains wherever he travels, if at all possible, often renting a car at the other end for the final leg of his journey. His daughter and two of his grandchildren visited last week from Illinois, and, of course, rode Amtrak both ways.

Robbins hangs out with guys who calculate the miles per gallon per passenger when they ride a long-distance train. They all believe public transit is paramount in our society. And they are worried that government doesn't see the value of trains now or for the future.

Robbins is so worried that he's forming a Santa Fe group to be part of the Southwest Chief Coalition, an organization already under way in Colorado and Kansas.

"For us in the coalition, the problem is also, how do we get the local officials to see that there is a problem and to get them interested enough to pay attention and try to resolve it?" he said. "This really is a crisis brewing."

Last year, the Colorado Rail Passenger Association issued a news release making dire predictions about the survival of the route. Jim Souby, association president, said local governments in the other two states have now pulled together \$100,000 for lobbying and advocacy. Now he's hoping that more New Mexico communities will get on board.

Getting the federal government to sufficiently fund Amtrak -- the business it established in 1971 -- still appears to be an uphill battle, he said.

"The risk has not changed. Amtrak is still struggling to get enough resources from Congress to

continue to run these trains across the country. ... It's crucial to us just for transportation needs, particularly as gasoline prices increase and as people get older.

"Second, this line is key to our economic future, and that includes tourism and any future freight that might develop," Souby said. "So, we need to get this line preserved and protected."

### **New Mexico's change of direction**

The future of the Southwest Chief is directly tied to events in New Mexico's not-so-distant past.

When Gov. Bill Richardson was in his first term, he made a deal some believe would have averted the danger of losing national passenger rail service here.

Richardson needed affordable access to a major rail corridor owned by BNSF Railway Co. (formerly known as Burlington Northern Santa Fe) in metropolitan Albuquerque for a state-run commuter rail service, which he saw as his legacy.

So in 2005, the state agreed to purchase nearly 300 miles of train tracks and their rights of way stretching from the Colorado border near Trinidad to Belen, south of Albuquerque. The first two phases of track cost \$70 million and were purchased in time for the opening of the Rail Runner Express commuter service, which began shuttling passengers from Belen to Santa Fe at the end of 2008.

The third phase, from Lamy north to the Colorado border, however, was never intended for immediate use by the regional train service. Although it was the largest section of track, 200 miles, the purchase price was less than \$5 million, and the deal was set to be executed in 2008, three years down the road.

At the time, transportation Secretary Rhonda Faught said the purchase was "necessary to close the deal with Burlington Northern Santa Fe."

Insiders say that's likely because the section of track in the Albuquerque metropolitan area, which connects to the main "Transcon" line through Vaughn, was the most lucrative of the three sections for the train company.

"We believe the purchase of this section of track is sound and is a good investment for future transportation uses," Faught said in a 2005 statement.

Five years later, however, state transportation officials said the opposite about the acquisition. At the direction of Gov. Susana Martinez, the state Transportation Department secretary told BNSF that the state wanted out of the deal. But another year has passed, and there's still no resolution on that point.

### **An alternate route**

National passenger train advocates say New Mexico's change of direction is one of the many factors that could be a death knell for the Southwest Chief.

Although a company spokesman said there are no active efforts to reroute the Chief in the Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico region, he also acknowledged there has been a public discussion about the issue.

"The issue itself has not really matured because there are a lot of things to be discussed, and we have made it clear that it is our desire to stay on the current route," said Marc Magliari, head of Amtrak communications in Chicago.

Amtrak's operating agreement with BNSF doesn't expire until 2015, he said, so it's too soon to speculate how negotiations will go.

Asked whether it was accurate that the Southwest Chief is in danger or at risk of stopping or changing course, Magliari said, "I'm not in the characterization business."

Amtrak officials are scheduled to attend a summit next month in Garden City, Kan., that has been organized by towns and counties along the route who want to get involved in securing the train's future. An alternative route for the Chief would redirect the train south around Hutchinson, Kan., then through Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle and the southern half of New Mexico, bypassing the state's populated cities, including Raton, Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

Such a route would result in a major loss of passengers at those stops. And there are no passenger stations built along the southern route for the possibility of picking up what few riders might be there.

Magliari emphasized that Amtrak is not "actively considering" that route.

"We certainly appreciate the interest of these communities and of the advocates, and we certainly are desirous of staying where we are every day in serving those communities with the Southwest Chief. We have, again, no plans to change routes," he said.

### **Funding from Congress**

A bigger piece of the puzzle, however, is in the hands of the U.S. Congress.

Amtrak depends on an annual congressional appropriation to operate its trains on 21,100 route miles across the nation.

Some members of New Mexico's congressional delegation are advocating for increased Amtrak funding. Democratic Sen. Tom Udall is among dozens of federal lawmakers who sent a letter last week to congressional leaders calling for greater support of Amtrak investments, not just for operations but for capital expenditures required for the current route of the Chief.

Democratic Rep. Ben Ray Luján has also voted against efforts in the past to cut funding for Amtrak and supports putting enough money into the program to provide vital service to New Mexico, his spokesman said.

Currently, federal spending on trains is dwarfed by what the government spends on other modes of transportation. In the last federal fiscal year, about \$43 billion went to highways and \$16 billion went to airports, compared to \$4.3 billion allocated for railroads (\$1.6 billion of which went to Amtrak).

Since a major transportation bill expired in 2008, Congress has been passing extensions rather than establishing new policies. In March, the U.S. Senate approved a new transportation bill that includes some provisions to keep railroad funding in place. Consideration of the plan by the House hasn't

moved very far, and on Thursday, officials agreed to another 90-day extension of the old funding plan.

Robbins said while members of Congress from New Mexico are on the right page, the blame for Amtrak's perilous situation rests with Congress as a whole, so that's where he believes the coalition can be most effective. Although the state's change of direction didn't help matters, he's not sure it really matters at this point who owns the track, he said.

"I won't name parties, but Congress has basically starved Amtrak since 1971. They are focused on putting it out of business rather than realizing that by 2030 and certainly by 2050, the demographics of this country are going to require a full passenger rail service greater than what we have today," he said. "It's time to start planning."

### **Securing the train's future**

One priority is improving the section of track between Newton, Kan., and Lamy. It requires at least \$100 million worth of work in the next 10 years, according to a 2010 estimate from BNSF.

The Raton Pass is thought to be among one of the most degraded sections of track. Amtrak trains are the only engines that chug up and down the steep mountain curves. Freight traffic no longer travels over the pass. Mail that was historically delivered by train now gets trucked on the Interstate highway system or flies in airplanes.

If it was up to BNSF, the track might not be used at all, which means corporate officials want Amtrak to pay the costs of making it work for passenger rail. Colorado advocate Souby said he's been told by BNSF officials that the company reduced maintenance on the track because of the diminished freight service. BNSF isn't trying to be "hard-nosed" he said, but needs the passenger carrier to pay for upgrades that only it will benefit from.

### **Competing interests in New Mexico**

Passenger train connections to the national rail network are not a daily concern for the New Mexico Transportation Department, according to Adjutant Secretary Mike McEntee.

"That is something that is not in our control," he said. "It's a better question for Amtrak or Burlington Northern, who own that track that they run on."

Asked whether the state would support continued use of the Raton-to-Lamy leg of the Southwest Chief, McEntee said one concern is the cost of track upgrades required along that stretch.

The director of the department's transit and rail division wrote a "white paper" in 2010 about the costs and benefits of that track acquisition. The state refused to release that report after a formal request, citing "executive privilege." But McEntee said it estimated that annual maintenance, excluding capital investments for upgrades that many say are required, would be about \$6 million, while Amtrak's annual payment for using it would only be about \$500,000.

New Mexico is already in "huge debt," he said, because of the Richardson-backed commuter rail. The state is on the hook for \$783 million over the next 20 years to repay bonds and interest on the train's setup costs.

"We have roads that are literally falling apart, and our budget has remained flat. We are scrimping and saving right now in the department to put every dollar that we can into the transportation infrastructure, and it is just becoming less and less," he said. "I think that's a decision that would come down to, with regard to passenger rail, where is the most bang for our buck?"

The state is still negotiating with BNSF about how to terminate the track acquisition. New Mexico paid the company \$4.7 million in earnest money for the transaction in 2008, but the state never took title to the tracks. Now, McEntee said, "we would just like to have our money back."

The contract "was never consummated," he said, and so the state expects to be able to recover the cash. A BNSF spokesman wouldn't comment on the likelihood of that outcome and also declined to discuss whether the railway is considering litigation.

"BNSF Railway has corresponded with the New Mexico Department of Transportation and has offered to meet further to discuss the issues involved," said Joe Faust, the company's director of public affairs.

Not everyone in state government is so blasé about Amtrak. Tourism Secretary Monique Jacobson issued a statement last week through her spokesman indicating the train service is still important to the state's tourism industry.

"A healthy and growing tourism industry is vital to the well-being of all New Mexicans," said spokesman Mike Stauffer. "Although Amtrak may play a relatively small role, it's still an important component in today's competitive tourism market."

Some rural New Mexico officials, however, are relieved that the deal between the state and BNSF appears to be dead.

Colfax County Manager Don Day does not want the passenger service to stop in his county, but also can't stomach one of the consequences of the state carrying forward the acquisition. Property taxes paid by BNSF are a revenue source for area schools and for the county. If the state purchases the track or if BNSF abandons them, that revenue would go away.

The flip side is that Colfax County is home to another national treasure with a historic relationship to Amtrak. Each summer, an estimated 22,000 people visit the Philmont Boy Scout Ranch, and Amtrak says 20 percent arrive on the train, making up about half the passengers who use the Raton station.

Additionally, transportation choices in those small communities are limited.

"It would just be another blow in the gut to these rural communities in Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. They are already in decline because of the loss of mining and railroad jobs," he said. "How much can we take?"

### **Running on schedule**

A few minutes after Mary Lee Moses and Aubrey boarded the eastbound train in Lamy, author Duane Roller was waiting on the platform for the westbound train. He and his wife, Letty, relocated to Eldorado because of its proximity to the Lamy train station.

"There's all the money you need for highways and airlines, but Amtrak is nickel-and-dimed to death," he said. "There is this crazy idea that it should make a profit, which is a thinly disguised way of killing it. Congress now is saying that people shouldn't have a choice."

As the train arrived, Roller raised his hand to shield his eyes from the sun. It was 2:27 p.m., just three minutes behind schedule.

"They have three engines today," he observed, walking across the sagging brick sidewalk to retrieve his small, black bag as the sleeper car and dining car slid into the station. He would arrive in Los Angeles in time for a morning meeting.

A piercing warning scream came from the yellow cart shuttling packages to the train. Roller disappeared into one of the open doors with a dozen other passengers.

A conductor scooped up a four-legged stool that would serve as the first or last step for riders. He waved to another worker at the train's opposite end. The engineer gave two short toots on the horn, then a metallic tone sounded as the brakes released and the train slowly began to roll west.

At least for this day, the train was something passengers could depend on.

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### **More Amtrak options**

Besides the Southwest Chief, two other Amtrak trains travel through the southern third of New Mexico. The Sunset Limited originates in New Orleans and goes to Los Angeles via Deming. The Texas Eagle offers connections three times a week through Deming to Chicago. Annual combined passenger boarding on both routes in Deming and Lordsburg last year numbered just below 1,600.

Ridership on Amtrak systemwide was up 8.5 percent last fiscal year, and also increased about 6 percent on the Southwest Chief, which carried a total of 354,912 passengers.

### **Amtrak's Southwest Chief travels daily along this route:**

#### **Illinois**

Chicago  
Naperville  
Princeton  
Galesburg

#### **Iowa**

Fort Madison

#### **Missouri**

La Plata

Kirksville  
Kansas City

**Kansas**

Lawrence  
Topeka  
Newton  
Hutchinson  
Dodge City  
Garden City

**Colorado**

Lamar  
La Junta  
Trinidad

**New Mexico**

Raton  
Las Vegas  
Lamy  
Albuquerque  
Gallup

**Arizona**

Winslow  
Flagstaff  
Williams Junction  
Kingman

**California**

Needles  
Barstow  
Victorville  
San Bernardino  
Riverside  
Fullerton  
Los Angeles