Amtrak to require masks for employees

News Wire Digest for April 20: Transport Canada suggests mask requirement, but VIA demurs; Hartford Line sees new reductions

April 20, 2020

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Monday morning coronavirus-related rail news:

— Effective today, Amtrak will require all customer-facing employees wear a facial covering of some kind — a mask if available— and strongly encourages all other employees and passengers to wear coverings. At Friday's employee town hall, the first hosted by new CEO William Flynn, CEO asked employees to start each day with a new disposable mask or a freshly-washed cloth mask. He said the company now has disposable masks available at all staffed stations and crew bases. "We are not providing customers with facial coverings at this time; they are responsible for bringing their own," said Flynn, adding, "If a customer refuses to wear a mask after an employee graciously asks, let it go. It's not a requirement, just a recommendation." In the question and answer session, obtained by *Trains* News Wire, Amtrak Executive Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer D. J. Stadtler, said that Amtrak is not requiring patrons to wear masks, "because we travel through so many states and localities where rules are different. We're strongly encouraging; If they refuse, make sure the passengers are practicing social distancing away from employees and other passengers," said Stadtler. While masks are not mandatory at shops, he noted that Amtrak "began distributing 415,000 disposable masks in the past few days and expects to receive over a half a million more in the coming week."

— Canada's Minister of Transport is also asking passenger rail operators to require masks or face covering for passengers. As part of measures announced Friday, which require masks or

face covering for air passengers, Transport Canada is recommending that passengers are informed when buying a ticket that they should travel with a mask, and verify that passengers have such face coverings before boarding. Rail companies can set and implement their own policies, and are authorized to deny boarding to ensure the safety of their operations. VIA Rail Canada has subsequently said passenger are “invited” to wear masks, but they are not required except for international travelers using the train to reach their place of quarantine.

— The combined CTrail/Amtrak Hartford line schedule is being further reduced as of today because of the COVID-19 related drop in ridership. The new schedule has seven weekday round trips — four Amtrak regional trains and three CTrail trains — in each direction. The schedule which had been in effect since March 30 included 11 round trips, five Amtrak regionals and six CT rail trains. The new schedule is available here.

— Correspondent Bob Johnston contributed to this report.