Transportation Leaders Convene in Illinois to Discuss Freight Train Interference's Effects on Passengers

(Editor's Note: After a decade or more of basic infrastructural improvements and billions spent, the railroads - which are moving far less freight in fewer trains than they did in 2006 - expect us to believe they cannot run a passenger train on-time without massively delaying their freight trains. Precision Scheduled Railroading? We think not).

At a roundtable convened by Congressman Rodney Davis (R-IL), stakeholders met to outline solutions to freight train delays plaguing passengers on Amtrak's Illini and Saluki lines. And while the roundtable's scope was targeted at the broken relationship between Amtrak's Illinois trains and Canadian National (CN) freight trains, the problem affects passengers across the National Network, which has seen a sharp spike in delays over the last five years.

The Illinois-Carbondale line remains, however, a canary in the coalmine: only 6 percent of northbound Illini and 17 percent of southbound Saluki trains arrived on time in Fiscal Year 2018.
For passengers, the answer is clear: host railroads must live up to their legal requirement to grant Amtrak dispatching preference. This agreement was a cornerstone of the agreement made between the Class Is and the U.S. government when Congress bailed-out the freight railroads in the 1970s, leading to the creation of Amtrak.

"We need to be able to work collaboratively with our freight railroad partner, Canadian National, to make sure that they're dispatching passenger trains with priority, like other railroads do," said Amtrak's Derrick James. "We're hopeful that the pressure that comes from the community, and that comes from your delegation in Washington, helps us come to some agreement on how we can make sure that these trains move over the railroad on time."

Passengers suffering from these delays have a new source of hope in the announcement by Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) that he's introducing the Rail Passenger Fairness Act, which will give Amtrak with the ability to sue offending freight railroads and enforce its statutory right to dispatching preference.

"By empowering Amtrak to hold the freight railroads accountable when they don't follow the law, we can improve Amtrak on-time performance and save taxpayer dollars," said Durbin. "For too long, we've seen on-time performance decline as a result of freight interference. The people of Illinois – and Amtrak riders nationwide – deserve assurance that they can arrive at their destination in a safe and timely manner."

Congressman Davis, while agreeing on the scope and cause of the program, is not quite ready to endorse Sen. Durbin's legislation. "At this point, I want to try and solve the problem without going to litigation," said Davis. "Because as we all know, everybody in this room here, especially the public officials know, when litigation becomes involved, it will prolong the final solution." However, to many of the stakeholders at Friday's meeting, simply identifying the problems doesn't go nearly far enough.

"It's a repeat of the things we heard already," said Visit Champaign County President Jayne DeLuce. "It's nice to have Canadian National and Amtrak at the same table, but we're looking for what the answers are, not just re-emphasizing what the issues are. We already know the issues."
Rail Passengers has been in court over late trains for the past several years. We've covered this issue nonstop for almost a decade. Join us, and contact your elected officials about freight interference today!