

**REPORT TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION CONCERNING
HB 4109, SECTION 14, PERTAINING TO STUDYING POTENTIAL TO REESTABLISH
THE AMTRAK PIONEER LINE
December 12, 2024**

HB 4109, SECTION 14. (1) The Department of Transportation shall pursue cooperative efforts with the State of Idaho to apply for assistance from the Federal Railroad Administration to study potential for reestablishing service on the Amtrak Pioneer Line.

(2) The department shall report on the progress to carry out the provisions of subsection (1) of this section in the manner provided by ORS 192.245 to the Joint Committee on Transportation no later than December 31, 2024.

SECTION 15. Section 14 of this 2024 Act is repealed on January 2, 2025.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December of 2022, prior to passage of HB 4109 during the 2023 Oregon Legislative Session, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) initiated the Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study mandated by the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. This in-progress study is analyzing restoration of previously existing Amtrak long-distance trains and exploring potential for new such services. The former Amtrak Pioneer route was expressly included in this study. After passage of HB 4109, ODOT's state rail planner contacted appropriate Idaho Transportation Department (ITD) staff to initiate a Pioneer dialogue. After email exchanges, ITD's planning manager decided to defer further action until delivery of the federal long-distance study's final report to Congress, expected in spring 2025. Initiating a second Pioneer study while the first study was still in progress would be unproductively duplicative. Moreover, during 2024, there was no FRA funding program accepting applications to conduct a study of the nature proposed by HB 4109. As a result, no opportunity arose for ODOT to cooperatively pursue efforts with Idaho to seek federal funding to study reinstating the Amtrak Pioneer route.

HISTORY AND TENTATIVE FEDERAL STUDY FINDINGS

The Pioneer was an Amtrak long-distance passenger train in operation from 1977 until 1997, discontinued due to reductions in Amtrak's budget. It ran between Seattle and Denver through Portland, The Dalles, Pendleton, LaGrande, Baker City, Ontario, Boise, and Ogden/Salt Lake City (with connection to Chicago).

In March 2023, after release of the initial Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for the federal Corridor Identification and Development (CID) Program, Idaho's Transportation Department submitted a CID application for a 435-mile Boise-Salt Lake City service that would restore a portion of the Pioneer route between those two cities. The application was not considered by the FRA for the CID program because it was erroneously submitted, through an electronic portal, to the Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail Grant Program rather than CID. According to ITD, it is providing technical assistance to the City of Boise which is preparing a second Boise-Salt Lake City CID application in the event there is another CID NOFO. This proposed corridor would be an Amtrak-state partnership with financial support from Idaho and Utah, and would not serve the Pioneer route in Oregon.

Concurrent with solicitation of CID applications in December 2022, FRA launched the long-distance train service study. Long-distance routes are defined by statute as passenger rail routes longer than 750 miles between endpoints operated by Amtrak and funded through federal appropriations,ⁱ so the former 1,647-mile Pioneer train met study parameters. Service on routes less than 750 miles are operated by

Amtrak through cost-sharing agreements with state partners, such as Amtrak Cascades in Oregon and Washington.

During 2023 and early 2024 the long-distance study identified 15 new and previously discontinued long-distance passenger train routes feasible for potential Amtrak expansion. These are collectively referred to as “preferred routes” and include the former Pioneer route, identified in the study as Seattle_Denver. One route has now achieved CID status, reducing the preferred routes to 14, all of which have been preliminarily assessed by FRA for complexity, benefits, and cost metrics with weighted results to produce an initial prioritization. The Pioneer ranked 13th out of 14, with a score of 7 out of a possible 15. However, the study cautioned this rating does not determine prioritization for implementation funding, which can be subjective. The study estimates developmental periods for these services could run 10 to 15 years. No federal funding source for further development of preferred routes identified by the study yet exists.

PRELIMINARY FRA LONG-DISTANCE STUDY FINDINGS SPECIFIC TO THE PIONEER

Route: Seattle-Portland-LaGrande-Boise-Salt Lake City-Grand Junction-Denver = 1,647 miles

Scheduled run time: Approximately 40 hours with minimum 8-hour endpoint service layover

Proposed schedule range characteristics:

Eastbound – Lv. Seattle 5-8 a.m.; Ar. Denver 9-11 p.m. next day

Westbound - Lv. Denver 9-11 p.m.; Ar. Seattle 1-4 p.m. 2nd day

Stations served:

Total - 29

Small communities - 8

Stations with existing service adding new service – 16

Additional population served: 1,660,000

Additional institutions served: Medical 3; Higher Ed 19; Military 7; National Parks 2

Proposed equipment for 2-night routes (5 trainsets required for daily Pioneer service):

Locomotives – 2

Baggage car – 1

Sleeping cars – 3

Diner – 1

Lounge/café car – 1

Coaches – 4

Transition sleeper/crew dorm – 1

Total for 5 trains – 10 locomotives, 55 cars plus 25% for spares

Cost estimate ranges to initiate service in millions:

Vehicles - \$650 - \$840

Stations & maintenance facilities - \$1,090 - \$1,410

Track and PTC upgrades - \$350 - \$450

Annual operating & maintenance - \$75 - \$106

Estimated ridership:

TBD; estimated to reduce vehicle miles traveled by 18 million yearly in service territory

ⁱ 49 United States Code [U.S.C.] Section 24102(5).