

OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Railroad companies have dragged their feet on safety improvements

Since 1969, nearly 300 people have died in U.S. train crashes that existing technology could have prevented, according to the Associated Press.

Add the three people killed in Dec. 18's crash south of Tacoma, Washington, and the toll is 301.

It will be 12 to 24 months before the National Transportation Safety Board completes its investigation into what caused the Amtrak cars to veer off the rails on the route's maiden voyage, crashing onto Interstate 5 below. The train was going nearly 50 mph faster than allowed as it reached a curve, the NTSB said.

Technology known as positive train control could have prevented the previous crashes, according to the NTSB. If speed, along with human error, caused last week's crash, that one also might have been preventable. But the technology won't be operational on that section of track — or on other parts of Amtrak routes in Washington and Oregon — until sometime next year.

Why the delay? Cost. And the relationship between railroads and government.

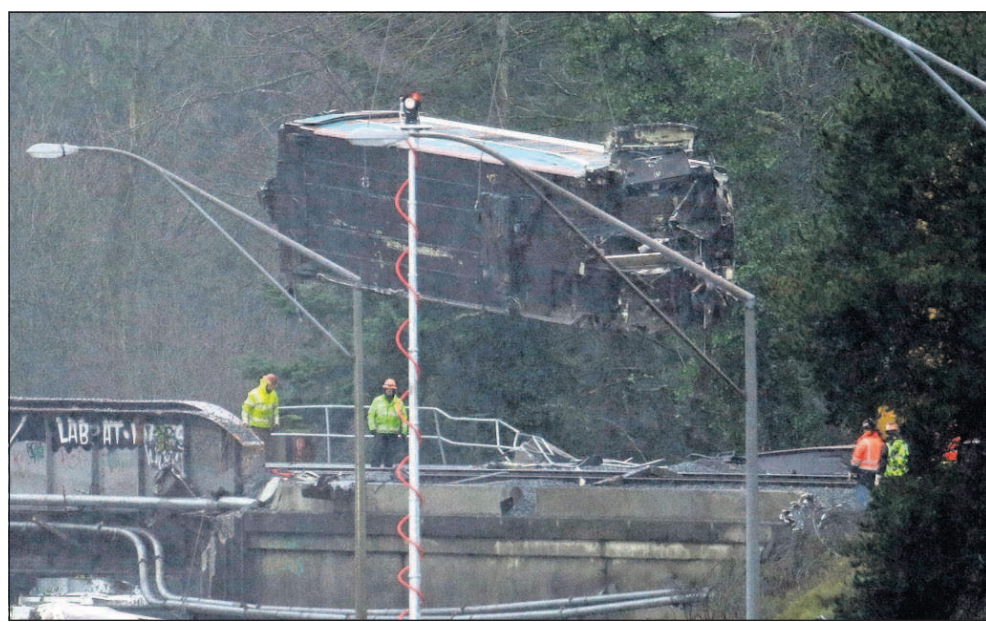
Unlike highways and airports, most

of the U.S. rail system is privately owned. The government steps in to improve roads and runways, although users help pay through taxes and fees. As private entities, railroads make their own decisions on track upgrades and safety improvements, although they're often driven by government regulations and deadlines.

Why the delay? Cost. And the relationship between railroads and government.

Cost is the key reason railroads convinced the federal government to delay — until 2018 — the deadline for positive train control. Cost is why railroads have been slow to replace old-style tanker cars — like the ones that derailed and caused an oil fire in the Columbia River Gorge last year — with sturdier, safer construction.

And cost is why Eastern Oregon lost passenger train service in 1997. The decline of federal subsidies made the route unprofitable, and Congress has never appropriated money for Amtrak to



AP Photo/Elaine Thompson

A damaged Amtrak train car is lowered from an overpass at the scene of last week's train crash in DuPont, Wash.

re-establish the passenger route.

From a human standpoint, it's unconscionable that railroad companies have dragged their feet on technology and safety improvements. From a societal perspective, it raises the question of whether government should invest more to help American rail service join the 21st century.

A good rail system benefits everyone, reducing traffic congestion by taking freight and passenger vehicles off roads. A great rail system gets goods and passengers to their destinations faster, saving time and money.

Though high-speed passenger rail remains a dream — at least in the population centers of the Willamette Valley — we do not yet have consistently on-time, dependable train service in the

Pacific Northwest. Our hilly and curvy topography requires slower train speeds, which is why the straighter route being inaugurated in last week's crash was an advantage. Rainy-season landslides can disrupt tracks. And because our rail system lacks sufficient long sidings or dual tracks, Amtrak trains often must give way to freight trains.

Still, Oregon is making headway. The transportation package passed by this year's Legislature includes money for rail freight loading facilities in Eastern Oregon and the Mid-Willamette Valley, rail expansion at the Port of Morrow and an extended rail siding north of Salem.

Compared with the past, those are big steps. Compared with the need and the potential, they are small. And overdue.

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Hot meals, friends and a program partnership

No one should go hungry for the holidays — or any other time of year.

That's the message Chris Duffy, nutrition coordinator for the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District, conveys every weekday with programs feeding senior citizens, either homebound or at the Bob Chisholm Community Center.

Duffy and the district teamed with the Warrenton-based agency Inner Potential to help prepare and serve meals for seniors from Seaside, Gearhart and Cannon Beach. With students from



R.J. MARX

Seaside, Warrenton and Astoria, their mission is to partner with individuals experiencing intellectual or developmental disabilities in achieving a healthy and fulfilling life.

"They were looking for something proactive to help their students learn hands-on activities, counting, organization, timing, serve-out on meals and the lunch," Duffy said. "The partnership has been fantastic and very well-received by the students."

Weekdays, any senior over 60 may come in and eat, Duffy said. Hot meals are served Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 11:45 a.m. The center serves soup and sandwiches Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Meals consist of about 800 calories, with a starter salad and "a lot of proteins," Duffy said. "If there are dietary restrictions, we make accommodations for that."

Since the program's debut in August, the community center has averaged about 26 diners and volunteers a day. Wednesday is considered the peak day, with about 30 diners.

Members of the group help prepare about 200 meals a week as part of the Meals on Wheels program, which delivers food to about 40 clients in the South County.

"It's not only the food they get, which is good, but they get to talk to people because it can be very lonely when you leave alone," diner Jean Wilson, 93, said, adding: "I don't have any trouble with loneliness because I read all the time."

At lunchtime, socializing is a main draw. "Monday morning, we have people start getting here at 11:15 when we have the coffee out," Duffy said. "For them to sit down at a table and talk about



Photos by Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

Staff and students from Inner Vision take a moment to pose for a photo while helping out at the Bob Chisholm Community Center in Seaside.



Lunch is served at the Bob Chisholm Community Center in Seaside.

the weekend and events throughout the week — that to me is as important as getting that nutritious meal, that balanced meal."

Diners look forward to seeing friends and socializing.

"I underestimated how important that would be," Duffy said. "About once a month we'll bring in a musician, games

— but the idea is to be able to meet with your peers."

Kevin Okerlund of Inner Potential said the volunteer work brings new skills and career potential, possibly in the local hospitality or kitchen industries.

"It's been really neat to see how independent they're becoming, and how the seniors have really responded," he said.



Chris Duffy and Judy Parish discuss the menu during lunch service at the Bob Chisholm Community Center in Seaside.



Skyler Archibald volunteers at the Bob Chisholm Community Center in Seaside.

Interaction between students and seniors is an added benefit, Inner Potential's Sue Thurston said.

"Building those connections in the community is really important, for people who sometimes may not have had that in their lives," she said. "As long as everyone is committed and it remains positive, they really look forward to coming."

R.J. Marx is The Daily Astorian's South County reporter and editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette.