

AANW:

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“We’ll always need cars in rural areas and elsewhere, but we really need to ensure that communities of all sizes can participate in mobility that works for everyone,” AANW President Daniel Bilka said.

In November 2021, the U.S. House passed a \$1.2 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill, which allocated \$66 billion in funding for Amtrak’s repair backlog. This would allow for improvements to existing passenger rail networks and potentially kick-start new projects that would allow passenger rail service across the nation.

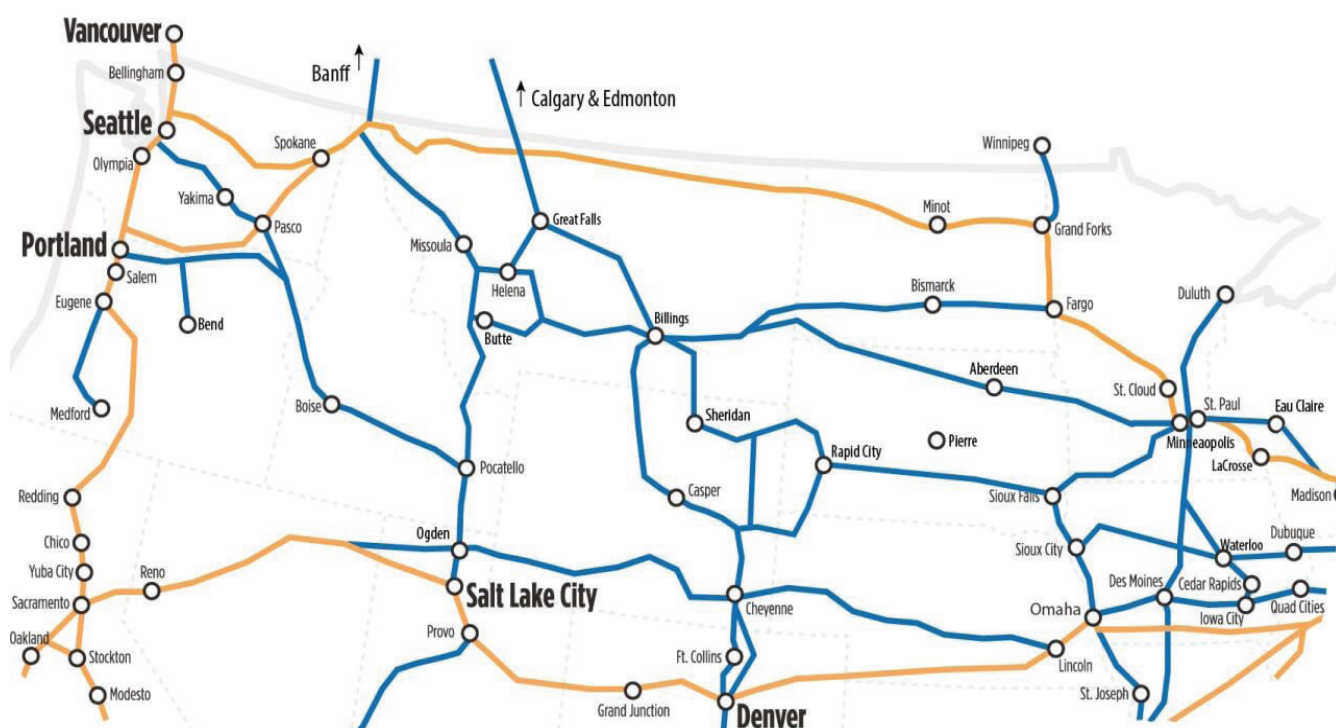
Meeting attendees pointed out areas where they believed a passenger rail could have a positive impact for Northeast Oregon — winter weather, medical access and college attendance.

“If you want to go to Whitman College in Walla Walla or if you want to go to Eastern Oregon University, how do you get here if you’re not driving? And what does that do to the quality and ability of that school to survive?” Hamilton said.

Economy, environment and equity

According to AANW, passenger rail is an ideal option for addressing what they call the “three Es” — economy, environment and equity.

Passenger trains provide benefits to the economy and taxpayers. On average, overnight visitors traveling to Eastern Oregon spend \$102 per day as a solo tourist and \$282 per day as a group,



This map depicts All Aboard Northwest’s vision for what passenger rail lines could look like for Eastern Oregon and the surrounding area.

according to the Economic Impact of Travel in Oregon 2021 report. Easy travel options help strengthen local economies, according to AANW.

“Travel means business,” Bilka said.

This also is the case for rural communities. For example, Meridian, Mississippi — which has a population of 39,000 people — invested \$7.5 million in a new Amtrak Station. This has brought \$200 million into a three-block radius of the station during the last 20 years.

Trains also can provide more mobility for significantly less cost. During the presentation, Bilka referenced a recent decision by the state of Virginia to invest in a new statewide passenger and freight network rather than expanded highways. Adding one additional



Isabella Crowley/The Observer

Passenger rail enthusiasts attend the Train Trek meeting Saturday, Aug. 13, 2022, at Cook Memorial Library, La Grande. All Aboard Northwest organized the meeting to advocate for a return of passenger rail lines to Oregon, Idaho and Utah.

lane to 52 miles of highway was estimated to cost \$12.5 billion and was not expected to reduce road congestion, so the state opted to invest in

rail instead. The rail project is estimated at \$3.7 billion — a third of the cost.

Rail transport provides environmental benefits, such

as emitting less greenhouse gasses, increased fuel efficiency and reducing highway pollution caused by congestion.

Lastly, passenger rail lines help with equity. There is a large portion of the United States that is not supported by passenger rail. Bilka joked about Amtrak’s “Connect US” map because it does not really connect the U.S. if not all states — including most of Oregon — are not serviced.

A common critique

A common concern raised in conversations about passenger trains is whether the mode of transportation should exist if it cannot run without government subsidies. Many critics point to the fact that Amtrak operates at a net loss.

“If you think about it, every form of transport on

the planet is subsidized one way or the other,” Hamilton said. “So, the question is how is it subsidized and to what extent? Consider how much money you as taxpayers put into highways, how much money you put into the air traffic control system, you put into all the other forms of transportation.”

According to Hamilton and Bilka, the purpose of Amtrak is not to make money, but to provide a service.

Next steps

The Greater Northwest Passenger Rail Summit is scheduled for Aug. 22-23 in Billings, Montana. At this meeting, the Federal Railroad Association will share how states can apply for funding. Bilka and Hamilton said this is the time for communities to start advocating for passenger rail access in their communities by reaching out to local and state government.

The Oregon Department of Transportation will need to submit an expression of interest to stay informed about the process and apply for the grant funding when it becomes available, according to AANW.

“This year is an amazing opportunity because, again, there is \$66 billion on the table. And they’re all going to be sent out in grant forms, which means local states, communities, tribes, interstate organizations, have to apply for it,” Hamilton said. “And we know that other states are going to be applying, so the first thing you need to do is you need to be asking your elected officials, specifically your governor, your state DOT, your state legislatures, to submit an expression of interest.”

Attorney:

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Pachico is slated to work in the Hermiston office with Jenkins, who grew up in Hermiston and came home to the community after law school. She first joined Umatilla County DA staff in 2009, and was promoted to chief deputy in its Hermiston office in 2015.

In 2019 she was Hermiston High School’s Distinguished Alumna of the Year, and left for the federal post in early 2021. Umatilla County commissioners in January voted unanimously to rehire her in her former position. Primus said she took the helm of the Hermiston office on April 1.

Ludington joined the DA’s office in February 2011 and in February 2019 left for private practice with the Pendleton-based firm Mautz & O’Hanlon. He also served as a Pendleton Municipal Court judge before returning to the DA’s office in April.

“The dynamics were different (in 2019),” Ludington said. “I was maxed out unless I could serve as a chief deputy DA.”

He explained that to advance as a prosecutor, he would have needed to move, but his wife’s family lives in Pendleton, and they love being here. So he opted for civil practice.

Then the county decided to change its approach to hiring deputy DAs, he said.

“We used to hire young deputies, who would get experience here, then typically leave,” Ludington said. “The county then tried to get people who want to be here. Senior deputy DA is not an easy job, but you’re paid to do the right thing. This is a fantastic place to work. It was the best move for my family.”

Ludington also is Pendleton Little League president.

“I’ve worked with most of our deputies for a long time,” he said. “We know and respect each other. We know our strengths and support each other. It’s funny to look back to 2011, at my first collective bargaining experience here. The average lifespan of a deputy DA here then was under two-and-a-half years.”

Now Primus has been

here for more than 10 years, and Jenkins and Pachico even longer, Ludington said, and other deputies came here in 2014 or 2015.

The deputies’ experience allows the DA’s office to achieve just results while best utilizing county resources, he said.

“Turnover has costs,” he pointed out. “Younger deputies are paid less, but how many months does it take to get up to speed? Then there’s the type of case they can handle. It takes time to accumulate the experience necessary to handle major cases. Stability is worth the cost.”

The freshman prosecutor

Blaire Lakatos is the office’s newest deputy, also joining the staff in April. She graduated from law school in 2020 and was in Portland before joining Intermountain Public Defender Inc. in Pendleton for about a year during the pandemic.

“It was a decent paying job,” she said. “It did not involve courtroom work, which I never envisioned doing. I looked into joining the DA office, but I’m a moderate. I see both sides of issues. With that mentality, would prosecution be doable?”

Lakatos met Primus, and saw the veteran senior and chief deputies coming back, which helped her make up her mind.

“Now I live in a courtroom,” she said. “In a rural area, you can get more experience. You may start with petty theft, but can soon dive into felonies and do it all. From the 7:45 a.m. meeting on, I get support.”

Lakatos credited her colleagues with helping transition her from the defense side.

“They allow me to have discretion and never be too busy,” she said. “Even the support staff are great. The team made it possible for me to hit the ground running, since they knew judges and courtrooms.”

Lakatos said she did enjoy her year with the public defender.

“I watched the deputy DAs, and saw how tired they were, when at their most short-handed,” she recalled, “yet what good work they did. Now I’m very much enjoying working with them.”



Monica Samayoa/Oregon Public Broadcasting

This April 15, 2022, photo shows Silvia Hernandez’s private well in the outskirts of Boardman. The Environmental Protection Agency lauded the state’s efforts to deliver clean drinking water to Morrow County residents affected by nitrate pollution but wanted more action to address the issue at its source.

Polluters:

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Kowalski encouraged the state to regulate industrial discharge and animal feeding operations through a permitting system established by the EPA’s National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System.

Before ending the letter, Kowalski left the door open to the EPA taking emergency action in Eastern Oregon.

“The Agency will continue to closely monitor the situation and continues to assess options for additional Agency intervention if necessary,” he wrote.

State agencies outline their efforts

Responding to requests for comment, representatives from the Oregon departments of environmental quality and agriculture explained the enforcement work they already were doing while also emphasizing the barriers

to expanding it further. DEQ’s Laura Gleim reiterated the agency’s position on enforcement: It would take action where it could, but its reach was limited.

in this area.”

Liz Beeles of ODA said her agency would continue to monitor and regulate groundwater pollution from animal feeding operations

“DEQ IS USING WHAT REGULATORY AUTHORITY WE HAVE TO REDUCE NITRATE CONTAMINATION FROM SPECIFIC SOURCES, INCLUDING ENACTING STRICTER LIMITS ON FOOD PROCESSING WASTEWATER FACILITIES.”

— Laura Gleim, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality

“DEQ is using what regulatory authority we have to reduce nitrate contamination from specific sources, including enacting stricter limits on food processing wastewater facilities,” she wrote in an email. “However, DEQ only has regulatory authority over a small portion of the identified sources of nitrate

and certain irrigated agriculture. But the latter could be difficult to track.

“The current monitoring framework makes it difficult to identify specific irrigated agricultural nutrient sources and link them to water quality outcomes in groundwater,” she wrote.

Beeles added the department was looking into ways

to “support or enhance” voluntary measures proposed in a 2020 plan.

Instead of focusing on enforcement, Oregon Health Authority spokesperson Jonathan Modie detailed his agency’s legislative efforts.

In an email, Modie wrote that OHA will seek money from the Emergency Board for well treatment systems and replacement water filters for affected households through June 2023.

During the Legislature’s long session next year, OHA plans to ask for money to pay for a new domestic well safety coordinator position, among other things.

Morrow County Emergency Manager Paul Gray, who has helped coordinate the county’s emergency response to the nitrate pollution, did not return requests for comment.

Scott Lukas, the committee chair of the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area, was traveling and said he would not be able to comment at the time.

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