

June 20, 2022

The Honorable Jay Inslee
Office of the Governor
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

Dear Governor Inslee,

RE: “Expression of Interest” to Federal Railroad Administration

I write to you on behalf of the Yakima Valley Conference of Governments (YVCOG) Transportation Policy Board to request your help in laying the groundwork for improving our transportation network, and specifically, restoring passenger rail service to Central and Eastern Washington via the Stampede Pass corridor.

We appreciate your support and leadership prioritizing the 2021-2023 transportation budget supporting WSDOT’s plan to meet the requirements of the federal injunction. Continuing work on high-speed rail will create jobs, increase affordable housing options, reduce pollution, improve safety, and reduce traffic. Offering rail including the development for equity-based transportation opportunities.

Rail helps improve air quality, provide a cleaner environment, and reverse climate change. Passenger rail is 3 times more efficient than a car on a passenger mile basis at current occupancy levels. Freight rail is 11 times more efficient than trucks on a ton-mile basis. Transportation accounts for 29% of U. S. greenhouse gas emissions. Investment in rail and other public transportation is a key part of making transportation cleaner. The quickest way to reduce greenhouse gasses from transportation is to travel by train, and move goods by rail, instead of by roads or air. In addition to these environmental benefits, improved passenger rail will provide economic benefits, and underserved communities will reap improved equity as well.

Since 1981, when the South-Central region lost passenger rail service, the Kittitas and Yakima Valleys have seen a steady decline in passenger-based transportation services while we continue to see an increase in freight movement. Our region believes that the BNSF/Stampede Pass Rail line should be considered as a long-term asset in the overall railroad network that not only could provide renewed passenger rail service to over 300,000 area residents but provide needed capacity relief to other rail lines within Washington State, the Pacific Northwest and Rocky Mountain regions.

As you know, the Joint Transportation Committee completed a study in July 2020 regarding the feasibility of restoring Stampede Pass service. Among the findings were: that the service is technically and operationally feasible, there is a high level of community support, and annual ridership is estimated to be “above or comparable to some Amtrak state supported services”. The study also states that “further work will be required to confirm or refine its findings”.

Our state has not yet undertaken the follow-up benefit-cost analysis and economic impact analysis studies needed to determine whether the service is worthy of investment. The time is right to conduct the needed studies. The 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) makes available \$66 billion in federal funds for passenger and freight rail. Among the provisions in the BIL, Section 25101 provides a specific program to facilitate the development of intercity passenger rail corridors such as the Stampede Pass route from

Seattle to Spokane. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) announced on May 13, 2022 the establishment of the “Corridor Identification and Development Program”. FRA intends for the Corridor ID program “to become the primary means for directing Federal financial support and technical assistance towards the development of proposals for new or improved intercity passenger rail services throughout the United States”.

The May 13, 2022 FRA notice requests that “eligible entities”, including states, submit “expressions of interest” stating their preliminary interest in the Corridor ID program. FRA plans to issue a notice soliciting formal proposals in the 4th quarter of calendar year 2022.

The funding opportunities for passenger rail infrastructure provided by the BIL open the door to projects that may have previously seemed prohibitively expensive such as restoration of service via Stampede Pass. We should take advantage of BIL funding by submitting “an expression of interest” to FRA now, and begin planning to submit a proposal for the route to be included in the Corridor ID program later this year. Additionally, the state should initiate actions to develop the data necessary to address the 14 corridor selection criteria described in the May 13, 2022 FRA notice. These criteria will be used by the U. S. DOT Secretary to evaluate eligibility for projects under the Corridor ID program.

Improvements in interstate and interregional rail system coordination, planning and investment for both freight and passenger rail service is consistent with the region’s improvement goals and the Yakima Valley Metropolitan & Regional Transportation Plan (M/RTP) 2020-2045. The RCC proposal aligns well with the M/RTP priorities of preservation, safety, economic vitality, freight mobility, transit enhancement, and transportation demand management.

YVCOG Transportation Policy Board wholeheartedly supports submitting an “expression of interest” from our state to the FRA. It will be the next step in the process of restoring passenger rail service via the Stampede Pass corridor. Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

James A. Restucci
Executive Chairman, Yakima Valley Conference of Governments.
Deputy Mayor, City of Sunnyside, Washington