
Transportation Committee

HB 1837

Brief Description: Establishing intercity passenger rail improvement priorities.

Sponsors: Representatives Reed, Doglio, Leavitt, Berry, Parshley, Farivar, Taylor, Ramel, Fitzgibbon, Zahn, Thomas, Macri, Bronoske, Barkis, Scott, Pollet and Nance.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Establishes targets for the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) for minimum trip times, roundtrips per day, and trip reliability for Amtrak Cascades service between Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, British Columbia.
- Requires the WSDOT to prioritize these targets as it conducts project development work, including as part of its efforts funded by federal passenger rail grant programs.
- Requires the WSDOT to provide legislative updates annually on progress working towards the targets, on any obstacles that would need to be addressed to meet the targets, and on whether it recommends modification of the targets because the WSDOT determines they are not achievable.

Hearing Date: 2/10/25

Staff: Jennifer Harris (786-7143).

Background:

The Washington State Department of Transportation's (WSDOT's) Rail, Freight and Ports Division is responsible for the state's passenger rail program and develops the state passenger rail plan. The WSDOT and the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) sponsor the Amtrak

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Cascades intercity passenger rail service, which operates from Eugene, Oregon (OR) to Vancouver, British Columbia (BC) on tracks primarily owned by BNSF Railway and the Union Pacific Railroad. For this service, Amtrak currently operates six daily roundtrips between Seattle and Portland, two between Seattle, Washington (WA) and Vancouver, BC, and two between Portland, OR and Eugene, OR.

In 1993 the Legislature established the following program goals for high-speed ground transportation:

- to achieve a maximum travel time of 2 hours and 30 minutes between Seattle, WA and Portland, OR by 2000;
- to achieve a maximum travel time of 2 hours between Seattle, WA and Portland, OR by 2010;
- to implement service with top speeds over 150 miles per hour (mph) between Everett, WA and Portland, OR by 2020;
- to implement service with top speeds over 150 mph between Everett, WA and Vancouver, BC by 2025; and
- to implement service with top speeds over 150 m.p.h. between Seattle, WA and Spokane, WA by 2030.

In October 2013 the federal government eliminated federal operating funding for state-supported regional train lines, which led to an increased need for state support for these lines. For the 2023-25 biennium, estimated expenditures to the state for Amtrak Cascades service will be between \$69 million and \$73 million.

In 2019 a federal Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements grant was awarded to the WSDOT to fund development of a Service Development Plan (SDP) to identify operational strategies and capital investment options to improve reliability, safety, and competitiveness on the portion of the Amtrak Cascades service between Vancouver, BC, and Portland, OR. Funds were appropriated for this work in 2019 and again in 2021. In June of 2024, the WSDOT published the *Amtrak Cascades 2024 Preliminary Service Development Plan* (Preliminary SDP), which provides a summary of possible alternatives to improve the Amtrak Cascades service.

In 2023 the WSDOT and the ODOT were awarded a federal Corridor ID (CID) Program grant for Amtrak Cascades service. The CID Program is a framework for identifying and developing new or improved intercity passenger rail services. The Federal Railroad Administration partners with corridors selected for the program to prepare, or update, an SDP. The CID Program spans the development stages for projects, including project planning and development.

The CID Program award will fund the integration of WSDOT and ODOT SDPs to create a corridor plan for investments over the next 20 years. The award advances work identified in the WSDOT's Preliminary SDP. The Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail Grant (FSP) Program, which draws on other federal funding, could contribute to final design and construction of CID-identified projects.

Summary of Bill:

The following targets are established for Amtrak Cascades service, with a goal of being met by 2035:

- two-hour and 30 minute trip times between Seattle, WA and Portland, OR with a minimum of 14 roundtrips per day;
- two-hour and 45 minute trip times between Seattle, WA and Vancouver, BC with a minimum of 5 roundtrips per day; and
- a minimum trip reliability of 88 percent on-time performance.

The WSDOT is required to prioritize these targets as it conducts project development work, including for the federal CID Program and the FSP Program. Project development work performed by the WSDOT must include infrastructure investments and coordination with host railroads, and other service partners, as necessary to achieve these targets.

The WSDOT must provide an annual report, due by December 1 of each year, to the Transportation Committees of the Legislature and the Joint Transportation Committee that includes information on:

1. the WSDOT's progress in working towards the targets;
2. any obstacles that would need to be addressed by the Legislature or another entity to meet the targets; and
3. whether the WSDOT recommends modification of the targets because it is not possible to address an obstacle that is expected to prevent them from being achieved.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.