

SENATE BILL REPORT

ESHB 1837

As Reported by Senate Committee On:
Transportation, April 8, 2025

Title: An act relating to establishing intercity passenger rail improvement priorities.

Brief Description: Establishing intercity passenger rail improvement priorities.

Sponsors: House Committee on Transportation (originally sponsored by Representatives Reed, Doglio, Leavitt, Berry, Parshley, Farivar, Taylor, Ramel, Fitzgibbon, Zahn, Thomas, Macri, Bronoske, Barkis, Scott, Pollet and Nance).

Brief History: Passed House: 3/12/25, 68-29.

Committee Activity: Transportation: 4/01/25, 4/08/25 [DPA, DNP, w/oRec].

Brief Summary of Amended Bill

- Establishes 2035 targets for the Department of Transportation's Amtrak Cascades service regarding improvements, connections, frequency, and reliability.
- Instructs the Department of Transportation to prioritize targets as it conducts project development work.
- Requires the Department of Transportation to annually report to the transportation committees of the Legislature and the Joint Transportation Committee with progress toward attaining goals and provide detailed explanations for constraints, whether or not they can be mitigated by the Legislature or another party.
- Instructs the Joint Transportation Committee to conduct an independent review of Amtrak Cascades 2024 preliminary service development plan.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

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.

Majority Report: Do pass as amended.

Signed by Senators Lias, Chair; Lovick, Vice Chair; Ramos, Vice Chair; Alvarado, Chapman, Cortes, Harris, Krishnadasan, Lovelett, Nobles, Shewmake and Valdez.

Minority Report: Do not pass.

Signed by Senators King, Ranking Member; Christian and MacEwen.

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.

Signed by Senators Goehner, Assistant Ranking Member; Fortunato, Holy and Wilson, J..

Staff: Jenna Forty (786-7755)

Background: Amtrak Cascades service is a state sponsored service operated by Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT), Oregon Department of Transportation, and Amtrak. Service began in 1994. Currently, the corridor serves 18 cities with a northern terminus in Vancouver, British Columbia and a southern terminus in Eugene, Oregon and is served by:

- six daily roundtrips between Portland and Seattle;
- two daily roundtrips between Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia; and
- two daily roundtrips between Eugene and Portland.

Ridership for 2024 exceeded 980,000 passengers. The cost to operate the service varies, but service costs for 2023-25 are estimated to be approximately \$70 million.

WSDOT is responsible for passenger rail planning and program development; however, train tracks are owned by external parties, with BNSF and Union Pacific railways constituting the majority of the Amtrak Cascades corridor. Service goals in current statute were established in 1993, and establish targets for speed and reliability to be attained between the years of 2000 and 2030, which include achieving high speed ground transportation service offering top speeds over 150 miles per hour between Everett and Portland by 2020, achieving 2.5 hour travel times between Seattle and Portland by 2000, and implementing high speed ground transportation offering top speeds over 150 miles per hour between Seattle and Spokane by 2030.

Amtrak Cascades was accepted in 2023 into the federal Corridor Identification and Development (CID) Program, a development program with a progressive federal funding stream based on attainment of negotiated milestones with the Federal Rail Administration. WSDOT produced a preliminary service development plan for the corridor in June, 2024.

Summary of Amended Bill: Targets are established for Amtrak Cascades service, to be met by 2035, which include: (1) a minimum trip reliability of 88 percent on-time performance, (2) a minimum of 14 round trips per day between Seattle and Portland and a minimum of five roundtrips per day between Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia, (3) improvements to first and last mile connections, and (4) emissions reductions.

The Legislature recognizes that voluntary investments by the government of Canada, crown corporations, provincial entities, and Oregon State entities will be required to achieve these target goals outside of Washington State borders.

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

Annually by December 1st, WSDOT must report to the transportation committees of the Legislature and the Joint Transportation Committee on progress toward attaining the targets. If WSDOT finds one or more targets to be unattainable, they must include a full explanation and provide what is necessary to mitigate the constraint. In the event a constraint cannot be mitigated by the Legislature or another party, WSDOT must provide a detailed explanation for how and why targets should be modified temporarily or indefinitely.

The Joint Transportation Committee must conduct an independent review of the Amtrak Cascades 2024 preliminary service development plan and any subsequent public drafts released prior to December 31, 2026. The review must analyze technical aspects of the plan, and effectiveness of the communication plans within the documents. Findings and recommendations must be submitted in a final report to WSDOT, the transportation committees of the Legislature and the Office of Financial Management by June 1, 2027.

EFFECT OF TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE AMENDMENT(S):

- Removes incremental speed and travel time targets.
- Adds a study at the Joint Transportation Committee to do an independent review of WSDOT service development plan.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Engrossed Substitute House Bill: *The committee recommended a different version of the bill than what was heard.* PRO: For decades we've been told by state agencies that it can't be done and that we should not set measurable metrics for performance because we won't meet them anyway. The truth is you cannot manage what you cannot measure and the lack of specific performance goals around Amtrak Cascades has led to an unmanageable situation for too many of our riders, harming

not just the reputation of the north-south Cascade but the perception of viability for the future of high speed rail, and east-west rail connections as well. This bill is about changing that attitude and culture of saying, "No" that has developed around passenger rail and asking WSDOT to honestly work instead toward a "Yes" instead of saying, "No."

People of Washington deserve a rail system that is competitive with driving. It's time to get back on track to deliver robust passenger rail. Cars and highway expansion have health consequences, we need more trains for people's health and people who cannot drive. These goals are essential for inclusion in WSDOT SDP and organizations keep joining to support and endorse this bill.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Representative Julia Reed, Prime Sponsor; Breck Lebegue, WA Physicians for Social Responsibility; Israel Lopez; Lael White, Climate Rail Alliance; Andrew Villeneuve, Northwest Progressive Institute / Executive Director; Meghan Anderson, Kittitas Climate Action; Patrick Christian; Arvia Morris, Environment and Climate Caucus of the Washington State Democrats; Brandon Bowersox-Johnson, 350 Seattle; Thomas White, Climate Rail Alliance; Steven Mazulo, SMART-TD; Meghan Anderson, Solutionary Rail; Mary Paterson, Solutionary Rail; Sasha Elenko, Solutionary Rail; Bill Moyer, Solutionary Rail; Ursula Euler; Mike Elliott, Rail Labor (retired); Larry Ganders, President, Olympia-Lacey Amtrak Depot Committee; Tim Gould.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.