



Amtrak, North Atlantic Rail Alliance Seek Support for Passenger Rail Proposals

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Two organizations have recently released multiyear, multibillion-dollar proposals for investment in intercity passenger rail. One, the federally owned passenger railroad Amtrak, seeks roughly \$75 billion to add or initiate service on dozens of routes across the country by 2035. The other, the private North Atlantic Rail Alliance, would spend an estimated \$105 billion to construct a new high-speed rail alternative to the existing Northeast Corridor (NEC) line from New York to Boston, plus new or upgraded branch lines. Both organizations have requested various measures supportive of their plans to be included in federal legislation. Some of these—though not all—were included in the INVEST in America Act (H.R. 3684), a surface transportation reauthorization bill introduced in the House on June 4.

ConnectsUS 2035

Amtrak's proposal, ConnectsUS 2035, identifies some 40 potential new routes and another 20 or so existing routes that would receive improved service, such as additional trains per day or faster scheduled trip times. All of these routes would be located off the NEC (at least in part) and be less than 750 miles in length, meaning each would be subject to a cost-sharing requirement between Amtrak and the states served. However, a key element of the proposal would allow Amtrak to offset required state contributions with federal funds for the first few years of operation, incentivizing states to sign on. Importantly, all final route alignments, schedules, speeds, and service levels would be jointly determined by Amtrak, state partners, and the freight railroads that host Amtrak's trains outside the NEC; Amtrak could not implement any of the proposed changes unilaterally.

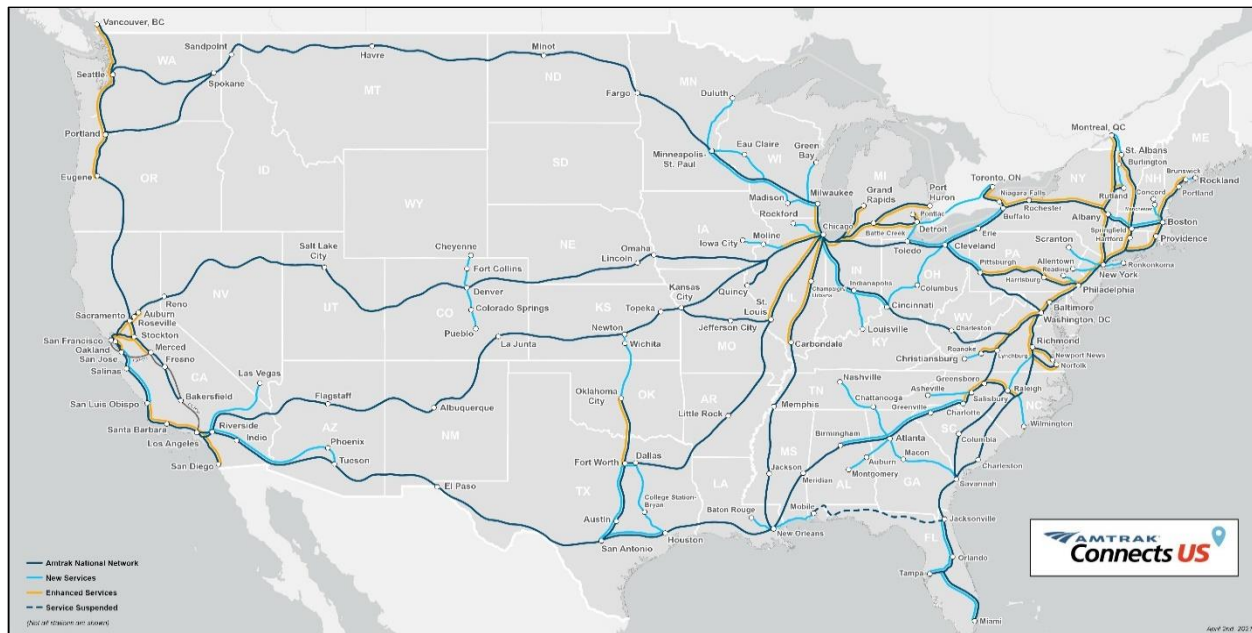
Many changes Amtrak proposes are drawn from existing regional rail or corridor plans. Some, such as extensions of current service in Vermont or Virginia, already enjoy strong support and are likely to proceed. Others, such as improved service between Albany and Buffalo, NY, have been studied but not implemented, in part because of the high estimated cost of the work required to allow higher speeds. Still others, such as establishing service between Atlanta and Nashville, have not been studied in detail. Amtrak has said it conducted its own basic ridership and revenue modeling exercise for each of the proposed changes, but detailed results of its analysis have not been made public.

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Figure I. Amtrak ConnectsUS Map



Source: Amtrak, <https://www.amtrakconnectsus.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Amtrak-Connects-US-Fact-Sheet-2021-04-16-1.pdf>. ConnectsUS 2035 contains no elements located in Alaska or Hawaii.

Amtrak has estimated that its proposal would require an investment of \$5 billion per year for 15 years (\$75 billion). H.R. 3684 would authorize an average of \$3.7 billion per year for Amtrak’s National Network—its routes outside the NEC—over five years, well short of what Amtrak says is needed to implement ConnectsUS 2035. H.R. 3684 would also authorize an average of \$1.4 billion per year for Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement discretionary grants and \$5 billion per year for a new Passenger Rail Improvement, Modernization, and Expansion discretionary grant program. These programs could be used to fund infrastructure improvements required to implement specific proposals in ConnectsUS 2035. The bill includes the provision requested by Amtrak allowing federal funds to offset state contributions for new lines.

Amtrak’s proposal recommends an accelerated process for settling track access disputes with host railroads, and the right to sue host railroads in federal court for interfering with passenger traffic, both of which are included in H.R. 3684. Amtrak also recommends the creation of a dedicated trust fund for passenger rail expenditures, arguing it would insulate complex multiyear projects from the uncertainties of the annual appropriations process. The INVEST in America Act would not create such a trust fund, but it does specify which funding authorizations would be drawn from a trust fund should one be created; other bills that would create a rail trust fund have been introduced in the House (H.R. 2769) and Senate (S. 899). To date, none of the proposals specifies how money from a passenger rail trust fund would be distributed, other than making it available for discretionary grant programs.

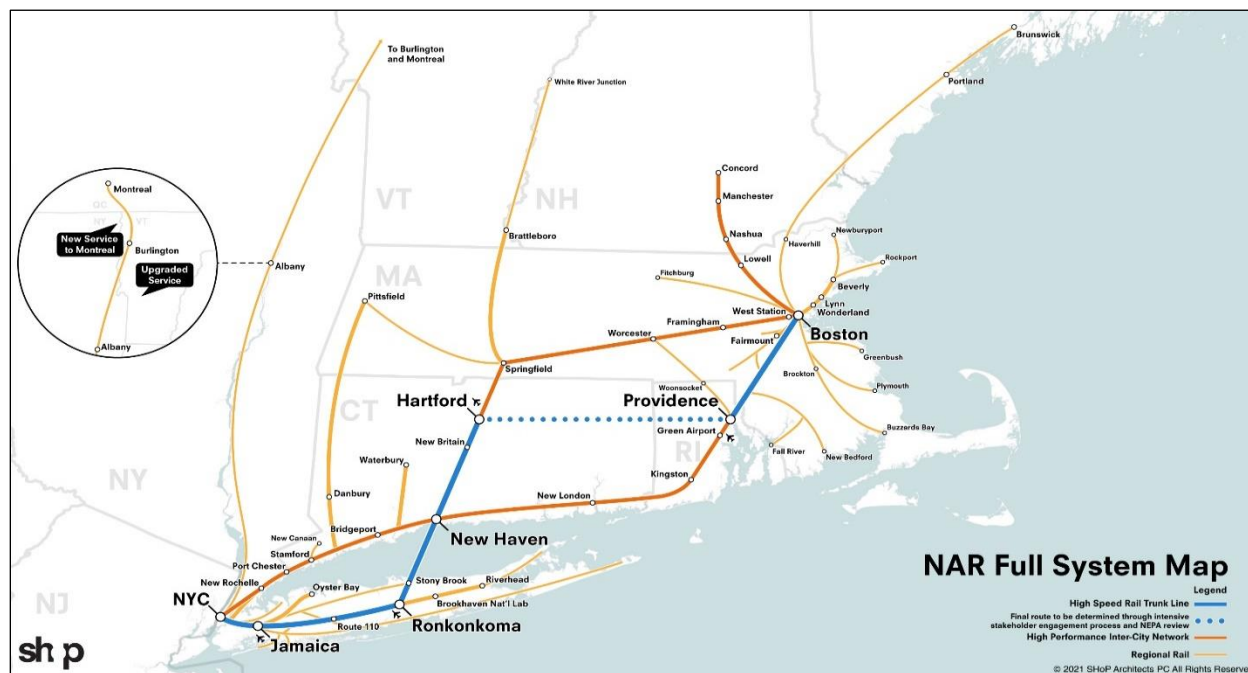
North Atlantic Rail

North Atlantic Rail (NAR), an independent initiative led by current and former transportation professionals and state and local officials, has proposed building a new rail line that would link New York City and Boston in one hour 40 minutes, cutting two hours off Amtrak’s fastest trips between those two cities today. NAR proposes to bypass the existing NEC by building a new high-speed route that would go from New York City to Long Island, then through a tunnel beneath Long Island Sound to Connecticut,

then inland via Hartford to Providence, RI, where it would rejoin the NEC on new parallel tracks. NAR also envisions upgrades to connecting Amtrak routes and commuter rail lines. Some of the improvements contemplated by NAR, such as new rail service between Boston and Concord, NH, also appear as part of Amtrak's ConnectsUS 2035 vision (**Figure 2**). Though more limited in geographic scope, NAR recommends electrifying many passenger rail lines in the Northeast and building a rail tunnel underneath downtown Boston. Neither of those proposals is included in ConnectsUS 2035.

NAR has estimated that its plan would cost approximately \$105 billion to construct. (Other plans have identified lower-cost projects for more modest time savings.) It has offered a roughly 20-year timetable for completion, but has identified a roughly \$24 billion suite of “early action projects.” As part of its early action plan, NAR requested that Congress create a new entity, the North Atlantic Rail Corporation, which could serve as a project sponsor eligible to begin the engineering and design work for the high-speed line and tunnel. On June 2, over 20 House Members signed [a letter to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee](#) asking it to enact language creating this entity. The INVEST in America Act, as introduced, does not include such a provision, although the discretionary planning and capital grant programs it would create might be available to advance individual components of the plan.

Figure 2. North Atlantic Rail Map



Source: North Atlantic Rail, <https://northatlanticrail.org/maps>.

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