

By L. Parsons

The group All Aboard Arizona visited Winslow last week in an effort to raise awareness for troubles being faced by rail passengers nationwide. Specifically, the Southwest Chief, a passenger train operated by Amtrak, that makes two stops in Winslow each day is in jeopardy.

All Aboard Arizona Executive Director Anthony Trifiletti led the conversation stating, “I am here today to tell you that we need to save Amtrak from itself and we need to save the Southwest Chief. Everything is threatened right now.”

Trifiletti gave a brief explanation of why rail travel is threatened. “A couple of years ago the Amtrak board, which is appointed by the (US) President and confirmed by the Senate, appointed Richard Anderson of Delta Airlines to take over Amtrak. Upon taking over, he decided to concentrate on the northeast corridor, from Boston down to Washington, D.C. He also thinks we need to concentrate on state supported short corridors of 750 miles or fewer and get rid of long distance trains.”

According to Trifiletti, “Anderson believes that long distance trains are not considered basic transportation, they are money losers that are purely experiential and because they are a relic of the past. National Transportation Secretary Elaine Chow echoed those words. The President has indicated that if the transportation package currently before Congress has extra money for Amtrak, he will veto it. So, what we see right now is the concerted effort by Amtrak to make all the long distance trains go away.”

Trifiletti’s argument against Anderson’s beliefs began with, “If you live in a place like Winslow, which does not have an international airport, it IS basic transportation. If you look at the vast spaces of the American heartland, you see all these little towns that surround the railroad that really have no other choice but to travel by railroad. Your options are driving the whole distance from point a to point b by yourself or driving 300 miles to a small airport and paying a small fortune.”

He continued, “Money loser? That’s a lie. The long distance trains are cash cows. Fewer than 10 percent of riders go the entire distance. This means that each seat is sold many times over the course of the trip. Furthermore, Amtrak was never intended to make a profit. It is a public service much like the busses in cities are there to help people get around.”

The transportation bill in front of Congress currently is \$2 trillion in funding for highways, bridges and other infrastructure. “In order to keep Amtrak running at its current level, we just need some of that money. We have another problem with Amtrak that is a little bit more worrisome. That is the equipment. So, they are pulling out trains like the Southwest Chief. The President wants to veto over that relatively small amount of money in that \$2 trillion bill.”

The other option Trifiletti explained was bus substitution. “Last year, Anderson suggested breaking the Chief up in to three pieces. There will be a coach train with no amenities from Chicago to Dodge City, Kan., a bus to Albuquerque and another short train to L.A. We raised

hell about that and so did the Rail Passengers Association. We won that one. Bus substitution is now off the table. For now.”

Amtrak was created in 1971 under the Nixon administration to help save passenger rail travel. “Amtrak is a political animal; it was created by Congress and it can be uncreated by Congress. Congress determines the business plan and the domain of Amtrak. They apply the money so they can execute the business whether the board agrees or not. Right now, Senator Jerry Moran of Kansas has put together coalition of senators to save Amtrak. He is holding up funding for the Southwest Chief until he gets a guarantee that Amtrak will remain national and its funding remains federal. Right now, the Republicans are reflexively supporting the President and the Democrats are reflexively supporting Amtrak. Your representatives, (Kristen) Sinema and (Tom) O’Halloran, are on board with supporting Amtrak. Martha McSally has not yet made a commitment for or against.

The entire government,” said Trifiletti, “is on a continuing resolution. That means that until the bill is passed or vetoed, the trains can run as is. That is great, only it means no money for replacing outdated equipment. It is a very messy situation. The current resolution expires Nov. 21. There are 10 legislative days left before the Thanksgiving break.”

It is estimated that 4,187 people board the Southwest Chief in Winslow each year. Its depot, the La Posada Hotel could lose up to five percent of its activity if the train is discontinued. “You get more trains, you get more people, you get more activity it’s as simple as that. The trains have already stopped running in Williams and the Grand Canyon. Amtrak service is concerning as well. They recently did away with dining car staff on the eastern routes. You can go in to the dining car any time you want, but there is no dining car staff, no chefs. At this time, they are not planning to do that with the western trains, but that may change. What they are doing is presenting lousy service to make the experience so unpleasant that people don’t want to take the train anymore.”

Trifiletti had a call to action for those in attendance. Among them were elected officials from Flagstaff, Holbrook and Winslow as well as local residents and railroad enthusiasts. He said, “The purpose is straight forward. We seek to gain support for the continuation of Amtrak’s national network trains due to threats to eliminate them. We need further support from Congress to appropriate the funds necessary to keep the current equipment running and procure new equipment for the long distance trains.

“You, your city figures, your county figures, your state people need to write to Amtrak and more importantly, your congressmen and senators to tell them that we need the national network of Amtrak and we need new equipment. The more time we keep on that continuing resolution, the more time we have to fight this. There should be new routes, there should be more trains and we need to keep the Southwest Chief on the rails.”

For more information, visit www.allboardarizona.org.