United States General Accounting Office

GAO

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Railroads,
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure,
House of Representatives

For Release
on Delivery
Expected at
2 p.m., EST
Wednesday
March 12, 1997

INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL

Amtrak's Financial Viability Continues to Be Threatened

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Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We appreciate the opportunity to testify today on Amtrak and the future of intercity passenger rail in the United States. As you know, over the last several years, we have issued a number of reports on Amtrak's financial condition, its Strategic Business Plan, and the status of the Northeast Corridor.[1] We are continuing to monitor Amtrak's progress as it attempts to address its financial problems and free itself from federal operating subsidies by 2002.

Our statement today presents preliminary information from our ongoing work looking at Amtrak's progress in achieving this operating self-sufficiency. In particular, we are updating information from our July 1996 and February 1995 reports on Amtrak's financial condition and progress toward self-sufficiency; commenting on Amtrak's need for, and use of, capital funds; and discussing some of the factors that will play a role in Amtrak's future viability. In summary, our ongoing work shows the following:

- Amtrak's financial condition is still very precarious and heavily dependent on federal operating and capital funds. We previously reported that Amtrak's financial condition had deteriorated steadily since 1990 and that Amtrak was unlikely to overcome its financial problems without significant increases in passenger revenues and/or subsidies from federal, state, and local governments. In response to its deteriorating financial condition, in 1995 and 1996 Amtrak developed strategic business plans designed to increase revenues and reduce cost growth. However, we have found that in the past 2 years, passenger revenues, adjusted for inflation, have generally declined, and in fiscal year 1996, the gap between operating deficits and federal operating subsidies began to grow again to levels exceeding that of fiscal year 1994, when the continuation of Amtrak's nationwide passenger rail service was severely threatened. At the end of fiscal year 1996, the gap between the operating deficit and federal operating subsidies was $82 million.

[1]Amtrak's Strategic Business Plan: Progress to Date (GAO/RCED-96-187, July 24, 1996); Northeast Rail Corridor: Information on Users, Funding Sources, and Expenditures (GAO/RCED-96-144, June 27, 1996); Amtrak: Early Progress Made in Implementing Strategic and Business Plan, but Obstacles Remain (GAO/T-RCED-95-227, June 16, 1995); Intercity Passenger Rail: Financial and Operating Conditions Threaten Amtrak's Long-Term Viability (GAO/RCED-95-71, Feb. 6, 1995). The Northeast Corridor is the area between Washington, D.C., and Boston, Massachusetts.

- Capital investment continues to play a critical role in supporting Amtrak's business plans and ultimately in maintaining Amtrak's viability. Such investment will not only help Amtrak retain revenues by improving the quality of its service but will be important in facilitating the revenue growth predicted in the business plans. In both 1995 and 1996, we reported that Amtrak faced significant capital investment needs to, among other things, bring its equipment and facilities systemwide and its tracks in the Northeast Corridor into a state of good repair and to introduce high-speed rail service (at speeds of up to 150 miles per hour) between Washington and Boston. Amtrak will need billions of dollars in capital investment for these and other projects.

- It will be difficult for Amtrak to achieve operating self-sufficiency by 2002 given the environment within which it operates. First, Amtrak is relying heavily on capital investment to support its business plans, which envision a significant increase in capital funding support—possibly from a dedicated funding source, such as the Highway Trust Fund. While such a source may offer the potential for steady, reliable funding, the current budget environment may limit the amount of funds actually made available to Amtrak. Second, Amtrak is also relying greatly on revenue growth and cost containment to achieve its goal of eliminating federal operating support. The economic and competitive environment within which Amtrak operates may limit revenue growth, and Amtrak will continue to find it difficult to take those actions necessary (such as route and service adjustments) to reduce costs.

Background

Amtrak was created by the Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970 to operate and revitalize intercity passenger rail service. Prior to its creation, intercity passenger rail service was provided by private railroads, which had continually lost money, especially after World War II. The Congress gave Amtrak specific goals, including providing modern, efficient intercity passenger service; helping to alleviate the overcrowding of airports, airways, and highways; and giving Americans an alternative to automobiles and airplanes to meet their transportation needs. Through fiscal year 1997, the federal government has invested over $19 billion in Amtrak. (Appendix I shows federal appropriations for Amtrak since fiscal year 1988.)

In response to continually growing losses and a widening gap between operating deficits and federal operating subsidies, Amtrak developed its

Strategic Business Plan. This plan (which has been revised several times) was designed to increase revenues and control cost growth and, at the same time, eliminate Amtrak's need for federal operating subsidies by 2002. Amtrak also restructured its organization into strategic business units: the Northeast Corridor Unit, which is responsible for operations on the East Coast between Virginia and Vermont; Amtrak West, for operations on the West Coast; and the Intercity Unit, for all other service, including most long-distance, cross-country trains.

Amtrak Is Still in Financial Crisis

Amtrak is still in a financial crisis despite the fact that its financial performance (as measured by net losses)[2] has improved over the last 2 years. At the end of fiscal year 1994, Amtrak's net loss was about $1.1 billion (in 1996 dollars). This loss was $873 million if the one-time charge of $255 million, taken in fiscal year 1994 for accounting changes, restructuring costs, and other items, is excluded.[3] By the end of fiscal year 1996, this loss had declined to about $764 million. However, the relative gap between total revenues and expenses has not significantly closed, and passenger revenues (adjusted for inflation)—which Amtrak has been relying on to help close the gap—have generally declined over the past several years (see apps. II and III).

More importantly, the gap between operating deficits[4] and federal operating subsidies has again begun to grow. Amtrak continues to be heavily dependent on federal operating subsidies to make ends meet. Although operating deficits have declined, they have not gone down at the same rate as federal operating subsidies (see app. IV). At the end of fiscal year 1994, the gap between Amtrak's operating deficit and federal operating subsidies was $75 million. At the end of fiscal year 1996, the gap had increased to $82 million. Over this same time, federal operating subsidies went from $502.2 million to $405 million.[5]

[2]As used here, net loss is calculated as total revenues minus total expenses. Unless otherwise noted, information on financial performance and condition was provided by Amtrak and was not independently verified.

[3]Amounts stated in 1996 dollars.

[4]As used here, operating deficit is the same as net loss, except noncash items (such as depreciation) and the one-time charge taken in fiscal year 1994 are excluded from total expenses.

[5]Amounts include excess railroad retirement payments. Amtrak is required to participate in the railroad retirement and unemployment systems. Each participating railroad pays a portion of the costs for all retirement and unemployment benefits in the industry. Amtrak's payments exceed its specific retirement and unemployment costs.

Amtrak's continuing financial crisis can be seen in other measures as well. In February 1995, we reported that Amtrak's working capital—the difference between current assets and current liabilities—declined between fiscal years 1987 and 1994. Although Amtrak's working capital position improved in fiscal year 1995, it declined again in fiscal year 1996 to a $195 million deficit (see app. V). This reflects an increase in accounts payable and short-term debt and capital lease obligations, among other items. As we noted in our 1995 report, a continued decline in working capital jeopardizes Amtrak's ability to pay immediate expenses. Amtrak's debt levels have also increased significantly (see app. VI). Between fiscal years 1993 and 1996, Amtrak's debt and capital lease obligations increased about $460 million—from about $527 million to about $987 million (in 1996 dollars). According to Amtrak, this increase was to finance the delivery of new locomotives and Superliner and Viewliner cars—a total of 28 locomotives and 245 cars delivered between fiscal years 1994 and 1996. These debt levels do not include an additional $1 billion expected to be incurred to finance 18 high-speed trainsets due to begin arriving in fiscal year 1999 and related maintenance facilities for the Northeast Corridor (at about $800 million) and the acquisition of 98 new locomotives (at about $250 million).

It is important to note that Amtrak's increased debt levels could limit the use of federal operating support to cover future operating deficits. As Amtrak's debt levels have increased, there has also been a significant increase in the interest expenses that Amtrak has incurred on this debt (see app. VII). In fact, over the last 4 years, interest expenses have about tripled—from about $20.6 million in fiscal year 1993 to about $60.2 million in fiscal year 1996. This increase has absorbed more of the federal operating subsidies each year because Amtrak pays interest from federal operating assistance and principal from federal capital grants. Between fiscal years 1993 and 1996, the percentage of federal operating subsidies accounted for by interest expense has increased from about 6 to about 21 percent. As Amtrak assumes more debt to acquire equipment, the interest payments are likely to continue to consume an increasing portion of federal operating subsidies.

Implementation of Strategic Business Plans Has Improved Financial Performance, but Net Loss Targets Have Been Missed

The implementation of the strategic business plans appears to have helped Amtrak's financial performance—as evidenced by the reduction in net losses between fiscal years 1994 and 1996 (from about $873 million to about $764 million).[6] As we reported in July 1996, about $170 million in cost reductions came in fiscal year 1995 by reducing some routes and services, cutting management positions, and raising fares. Amtrak projected that these actions would reduce future net losses by about $315 million annually once they were in place. The net loss was reduced in fiscal year 1996 as total revenues increased more than total expenses did. In contrast, Amtrak estimates that its net loss in fiscal year 1996 would have been about $1.1 billion if no actions had been taken to address its financial crisis in 1994.

Although the strategic business plans have helped reduce the net losses, targets for these losses have often been missed. To illustrate, Amtrak's plans for fiscal years 1995 and 1996 included actions to reduce the net losses by $195 million—from about $834 million in 1994 (in current year dollars) to $639 million in fiscal year 1996. This reduction was to be accomplished, in part, by increasing revenues $191 million while holding expenses at about the 1994 level. However, actual net losses for this period totaled about $1.572 billion, or about $127 million more than the $1.445 billion Amtrak had planned. This difference was primarily due to the severe winter weather in fiscal year 1996—a contingency that Amtrak had not planned for and one that added about $29 million to expenses—and the unsuccessful implementation of various elements of the fiscal year 1996 business plan. For example, many of the productivity improvements (such as reducing the size of train crews) that Amtrak had planned in fiscal year 1996 were not achieved. As a result, cost savings fell short of Amtrak's $108 million target by about $60 million. As we reported in July 1996, Amtrak has made little progress in negotiating new productivity improvements with its labor unions.

For fiscal year 1997, as a result of higher than anticipated losses and an expected accounting adjustment, Amtrak planned for a net loss of $726 million. However, after the first quarter of operations, revenues were below target, and although expenses were lower than expected, the operating deficit was almost $4 million more than planned for that quarter. Furthermore, fiscal year 1997 financial results will be affected by the postponement of route and service adjustments planned for November 1996. Amtrak estimates that postponing these adjustments will

[6] As mentioned, the net loss for fiscal year 1994 excludes the one-time charge of $255 million (in 1996 dollars). Amounts stated in 1996 dollars.

bring a net revenue reduction of $6.9 million and a net cost increase of $29.2 million. Part of this increased cost will be offset by an additional federal operating grant of $22.5 million made to keep these routes operating. In part, as a result of these increased costs, Amtrak revised its planned fiscal year 1997 net loss upward to $762 million from the originally projected $726 million. Even that might not be achieved. As a result of additional unanticipated expenses and revenue shortfalls, Amtrak projects its actual fiscal year 1997 year-end net loss could be about $786 million.

Amtrak's projected fiscal year 1997 financial results may also affect its cash flow and the need to borrow money to make ends meet. For example, in January 1997, Amtrak projected a cash flow deficit of about $96 million at the end of fiscal year 1997—about $30 million more than planned. This deficit may require Amtrak to begin borrowing as early as March 1997 to pay their bills. Moreover, the cash flow deficit may be even larger than projected if Amtrak does not receive anticipated revenues from the sale of property ($16 million) and cost savings from lower electric power prices in the Northeast Corridor ($20.5 million). Amtrak's fiscal year 1998 projected year-end cash balance is also bleak. On the basis of current projections, Amtrak estimates that it may have to borrow up to $148 million next year. Amtrak currently has short-term lines of credit of $150 million.

Amtrak Continues to Have Significant Capital Investment Needs

Amtrak's need for capital funds remains high. We reported in June 1996 that Amtrak will need billions of dollars to address its capital needs, such as bringing the Northeast Corridor up to a state of good repair.[7] This situation largely continues today. In May 1996, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and Amtrak estimated that about $2 billion would be needed over the next 3 to 5 years to recapitalize the south end of the corridor and preserve its ability to operate in the near term at existing service levels. This renovation would include making improvements in the North and East river tunnels serving New York City and restoring the system that provides electric power to the corridor. This system, with equipment designed to last 40 to 50 years, is now between 60 and 80 years old, and, according to FRA and Amtrak, has gotten to the point at which it no longer allows Amtrak and others to provide reliable high-speed and commuter service. FRA and Amtrak believe that this capital investment of about $2 billion would help reverse the trend of adding time to published schedules because of poor on-time performance. Over the next 20 years,

[7]See Northeast Rail Corridor: Information on Users, Funding Sources, and Expenditures, previously cited.

FRA and Amtrak estimate, up to $6.7 billion may be needed to recapitalize the corridor and make improvements targeted to respond to high-priority growth opportunities.

A significant capital investment will also be required for other projects as well. For example, additional capital assistance will be required to introduce high-speed rail service between New York and Boston. In 1992, the Amtrak Authorization and Development Act directed that a plan be developed for regularly scheduled passenger rail service between New York and Boston in 3 hours or less. Currently, such trips take, on average, about 4-1/2 hours. Significant rehabilitation of the existing infrastructure as well as electrification of the line north of New Haven, Connecticut, will be required to accomplish this goal. According to Amtrak, since fiscal year 1991 the federal government has invested about $900 million in the high-speed rail program, and an additional $1.4 billion will be required to complete the project. A significant capital investment will also be required to acquire new equipment and overhaul existing equipment. Amtrak plans to spend about $1.7 billion over the next 6 years for these purposes.

Progress Has Been Slow in Addressing Previously Reported Capital Needs

We reported in July 1996 and February 1995 on Amtrak's need for capital investments and some of the problems being experienced as a result. We noted the additional costs of maintaining an aging fleet, the backlogs and funding shortages that were plaguing Amtrak's equipment overhaul program, and the need for substantial capital improvements and modernization at maintenance and overhaul facilities. We also commented on the shrinking availability of federal funds to meet new capital investment needs. Our ongoing work, the results of which we expect to report later this year, is looking at these issues.

The preliminary results of our work indicate that Amtrak has made some progress in addressing capital needs, but the going has been slow, and in some cases Amtrak may be facing significant future costs. For example, we reported in February 1995 that about 31 percent of Amtrak's passenger car fleet was beyond its useful life—estimated at between 25 and 30 years—and that 23 percent of the fleet was made up of Heritage cars (cars that Amtrak obtained in 1971 from other railroads) that averaged over 40 years old. Since our report, the average age of the passenger car fleet has declined from 22.4 years old (in fiscal year 1994) to 20.7 years old (at the end of fiscal year 1996), and the number of Heritage cars has declined from 437 to 246. This drop is significant because Heritage cars, as a result of their age, were subject to frequent failures, and their downtime for repair was about 3 times longer than for other types of cars. However, these trends may be masking substantial future costs to maintain the fleet. In October 1996, about 53 percent of the cars in Amtrak's active fleet of 1,600 passenger cars averaged 20 years old or more and were at or approaching the end of their useful life (see app. VIII). It is safe to assume that as this equipment continues to age, it will be subject to more frequent failures and require more expensive repairs.

Our ongoing work also shows that the portion of Amtrak's federal capital grant available to replace assets has continued to shrink.[8] In February 1995, we reported that an increasing portion of the capital grant was being devoted to debt service, overhauls of existing equipment, and legally mandated uses, such as equipment modifications and environmental cleanup. In fiscal year 1994, only about $54 million of Amtrak's federal capital grant of $195 million was available to purchase new equipment and meet other capital investment needs. Since our report, although the portion of the capital grant available to meet general capital investment needs increased in fiscal years 1995 and 1996, it shrunk in fiscal year 1997 (see app. IX). In fiscal year 1997, only $12 million of the capital grant of $223 million is expected to be available for general capital needs. The rest will be devoted to debt service ($75 million), overhauls of existing equipment ($110 million), or legally mandated work ($26 million). It is likely that as Amtrak assumes increased debt (including capital lease obligations) to acquire equipment and as the number of cars in Amtrak's fleet that exceed their useful life increases, even less of Amtrak's future capital grants will be available to meet capital investment needs.

Achieving Operating Self-Sufficiency by 2002 Will Be Difficult

Amtrak's ability to reach operating self-sufficiency by 2002 will be difficult given the environment within which it operates. Amtrak is relying heavily on capital investment to support its goal of eliminating federal operating subsidies. For example, Amtrak's draft fiscal year 1997-2002 Strategic Capital Plan indicates that about 830 million dollars' worth of actions needed to close gaps in the operating budget through 2002 is directly linked to capital investments. To support these actions, Amtrak anticipates significantly increased federal capital assistance—about $750 million to $800 million per year. In comparison, in fiscal year 1997, Amtrak received federal capital funding of $478 million.[9] Amtrak would like this increased

[8]The federal capital grants referred to in this discussion exclude ones for the Northeast Corridor Improvement Program (NECIP) and the high-speed rail program. In fiscal years 1994 and 1997, Amtrak received $225 million and $255 million, respectively, for these programs.

[9]This amount includes the $255 million for NECIP and the high-speed rail program.

assistance to be provided from a dedicated funding source. Given today's budget environment, it may be difficult to obtain this degree of increased federal funding. In addition, providing funds from a dedicated source—such as the federal Highway Trust Fund—may not give Amtrak as much money as it expects. Historically, spending for programs financed by this Trust Fund, such as the federal-aid highway program, has generally been constrained by limiting the total amount of funds that can be obligated in a given year.

Amtrak is also subject to the competitive and economic environment within which it operates. We reported in February 1995 that competitive pressures had limited Amtrak's ability to increase revenues by raising fares. Fares were constrained, in part, by lower fares on airlines and intercity buses. From fiscal year 1994 to fiscal year 1996, Amtrak's yield (revenue per passenger mile) increased about 24 percent, from 15.4 cents per passenger mile to about 19.1 cents. In comparison, between 1994 and 1995, airline yields declined slightly, intercity bus yields increased 18 percent, and the real price of unleaded regular gasoline increased a little less than 1 percent.[10] However, it appears that Amtrak's ability to increase revenues through fare increases has come at the expense of ridership, the number of passenger miles, and the passenger miles per seat-mile (load factor). Between fiscal years 1994 and 1996, all three declined.[11] Such trade-offs in the future could limit further increases in Amtrak's yield and ultimately revenue growth.

Finally, Amtrak will continue to find it difficult to take those actions necessary to further reduce costs. These include making the route and service adjustments necessary to save money and to collectively bargain cost-saving productivity improvements with its employees. During fiscal year 1995, Amtrak was successful in reducing and eliminating some routes and services. For example, on seven routes Amtrak reduced the frequency of service from daily to 3 or 4 times per week, and on nine other routes various segments were eliminated. Amtrak estimates that such actions saved about $54 million. Amtrak was less successful in making route and service adjustments planned for fiscal year 1997 and estimates that its failure to take these actions will increase its projected fiscal year 1997 loss by $13.5 million. Amtrak has also been unsuccessful in negotiating productivity improvements with labor unions. Such improvements were

[10]Data for 1996 were not available for this analysis.

[11]Between fiscal years 1994 and 1996, Amtrak's annual ridership declined from 21.2 million to 19.7 million passengers, passenger miles declined from 5.9 billion to 5.1 billion, and the load factor declined from 49 to 46 percent. Ridership excludes commuter passengers.

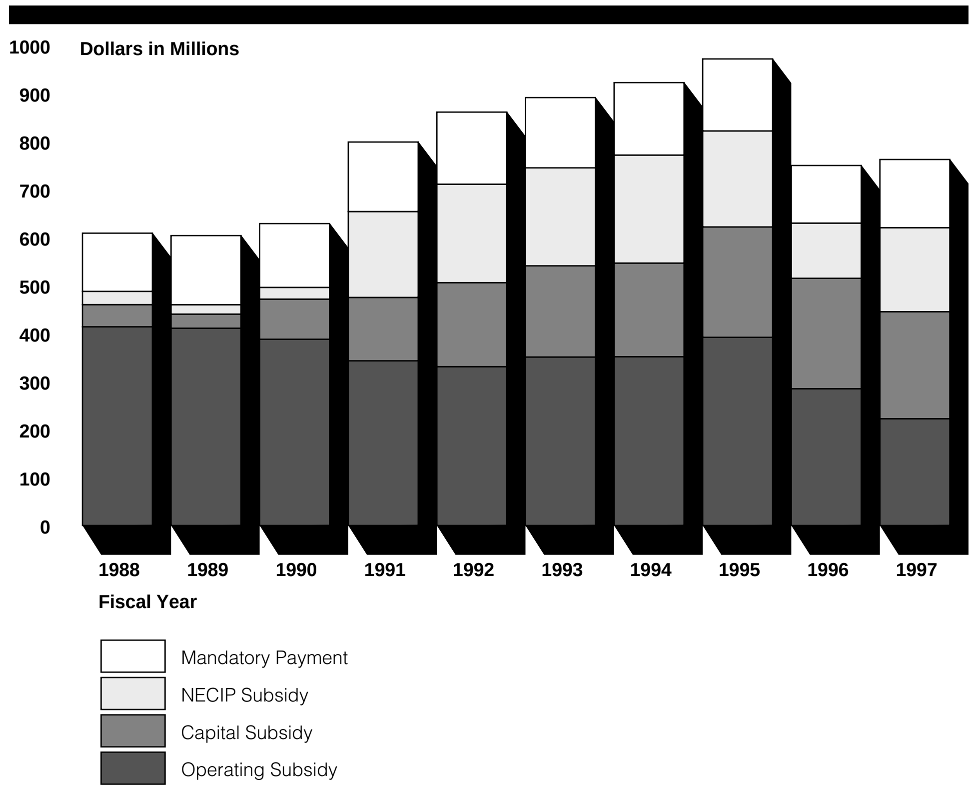
expected to save about $26 million in fiscal year 1995 and $19.0 million in fiscal year 1996. According to an Amtrak official, over the last 2 years Amtrak has not pursued negotiations for productivity improvements.

Conclusions

Amtrak's financial future has been staked on the ability to eliminate federal operating support by 2002 by increasing revenues, controlling costs, and providing customers with high-quality service. Although the business plans have helped reduce net losses, Amtrak continues to face significant challenges in accomplishing this goal, and it is likely Amtrak will continue to require federal financial support—both operating and capital—well into the future.

Madam Chairwoman, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you or Members of the Subcommittee may have.

Federal Appropriations for Amtrak, Fiscal Years 1988-97



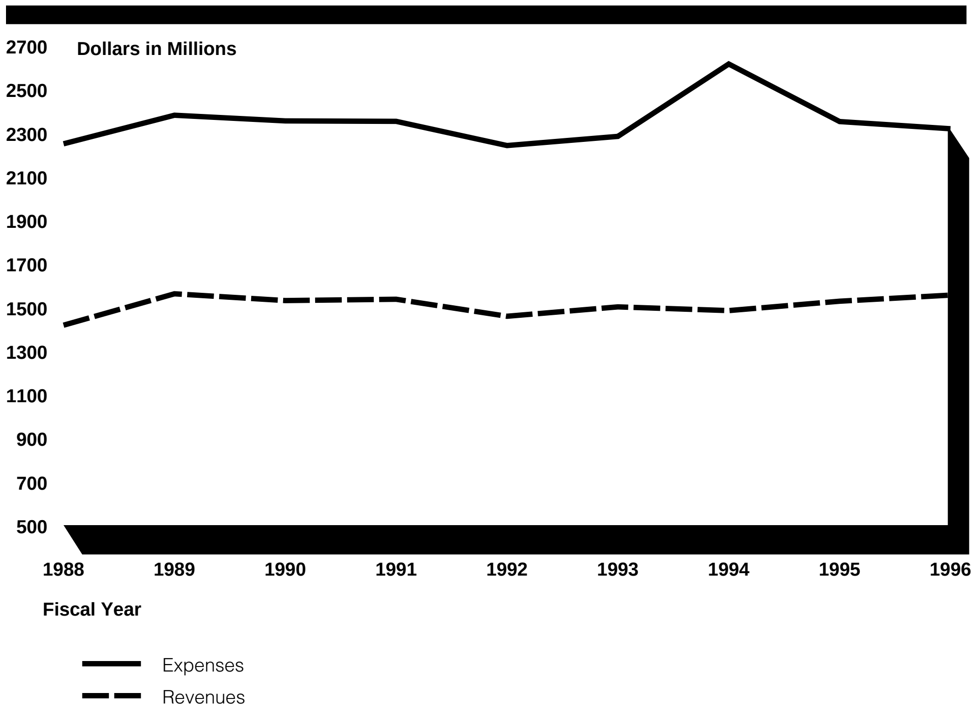
Notes: Mandatory payments to the Railroad Retirement Fund for fiscal years 1988 through 1990 are estimated.

The appropriations for fiscal year 1993 include $20 million in supplemental operating funds and $25 million for capital requirements. The appropriations for fiscal year 1997 include $22.5 million in supplemental operating funds and $60 million for the Northeast Corridor Improvement Program.

For fiscal year 1997, an additional $80 million was appropriated to Amtrak for high-speed rail.

Source: Amtrak.

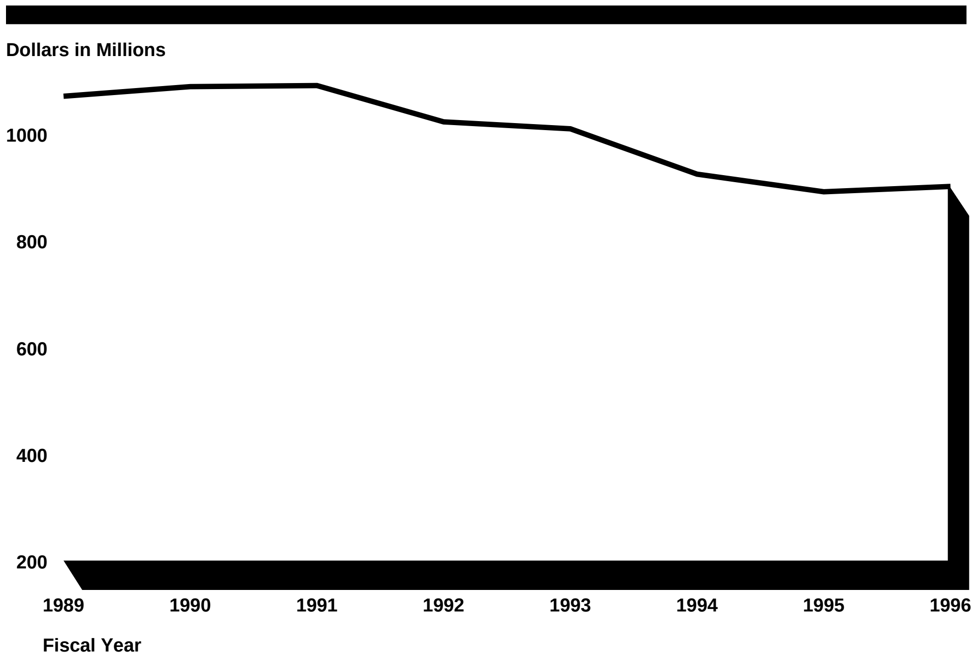
Revenues and Expenses, Fiscal Years 1988-96



Note: Amounts are in 1996 dollars.

Source: Amtrak.

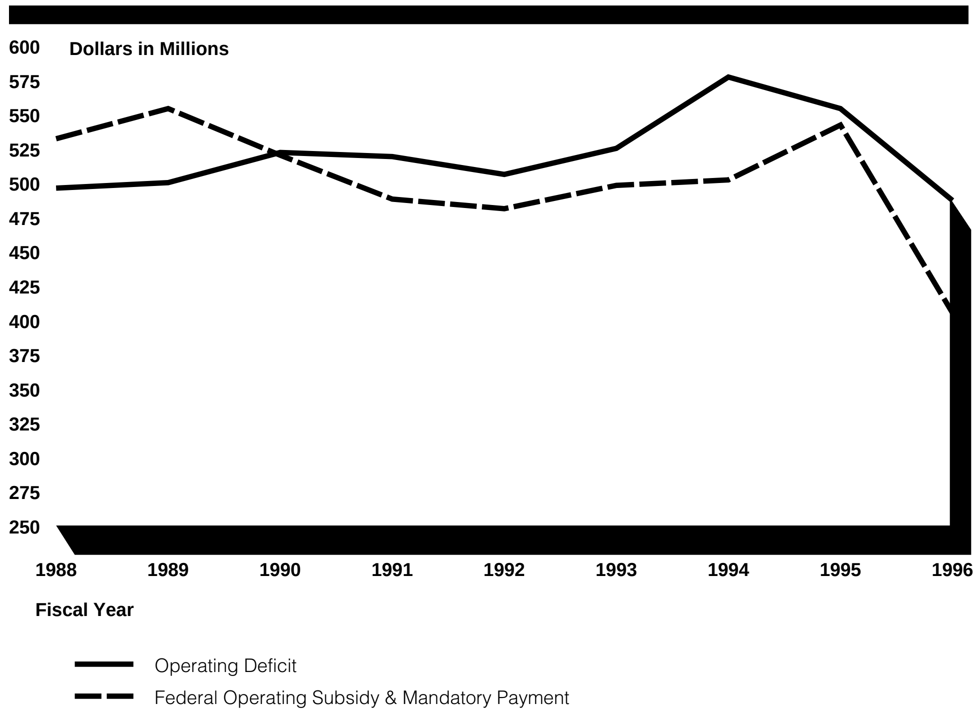
Amtrak's Passenger Revenues, Fiscal Years 1989-96



Note: Amounts are in 1996 dollars.

Source: GAO's analysis of Amtrak's data.

Amtrak's Federal Operating Subsidy and Mandatory Payment Compared to the Operating Deficit, Fiscal Years 1988-96

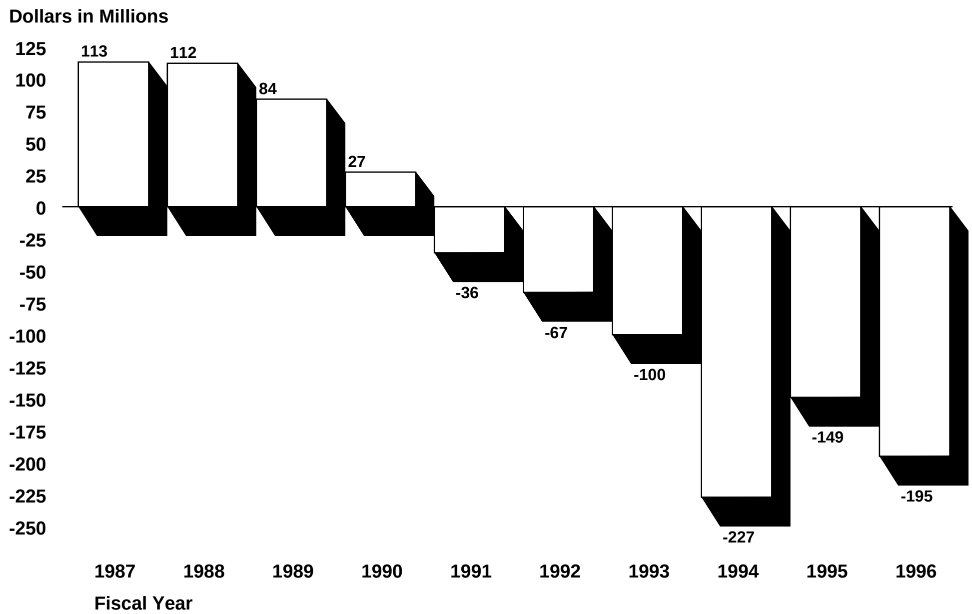


Notes: Amtrak's operating deficit was calculated as total revenues minus total expenses, excluding noncash expenses such as depreciation.

Amounts are in current year dollars.

Source: GAO's analysis of Amtrak's data.

Amtrak's Working Capital Surplus/Deficit, Fiscal Years 1987-96

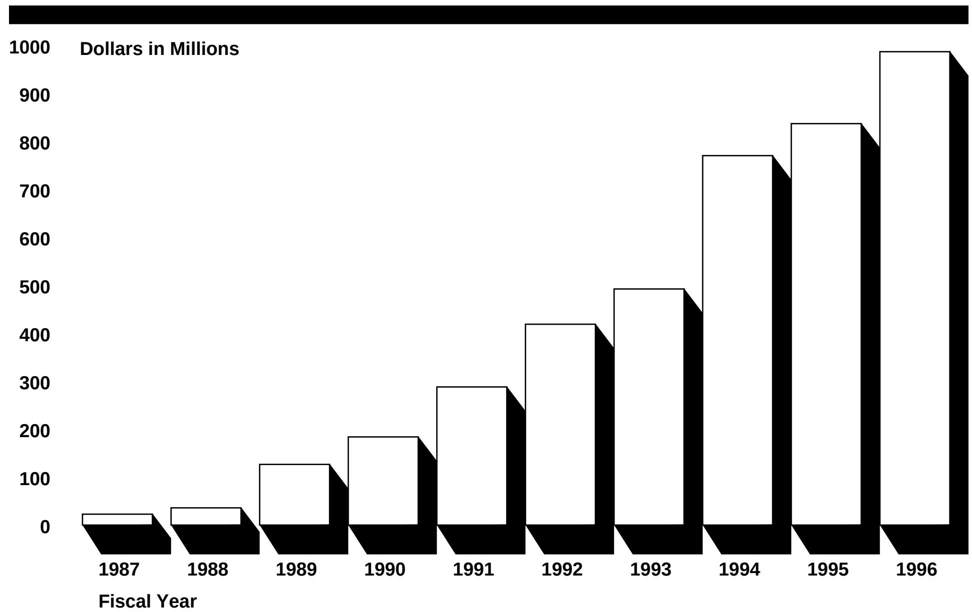


Notes: Working capital is the difference between current assets and current liabilities.

Amounts are in current year dollars. In 1996 dollars, working capital declined from $149 million in fiscal year 1987 to a deficit of $195 million in fiscal year 1996.

Source: GAO's analysis of Amtrak's data.

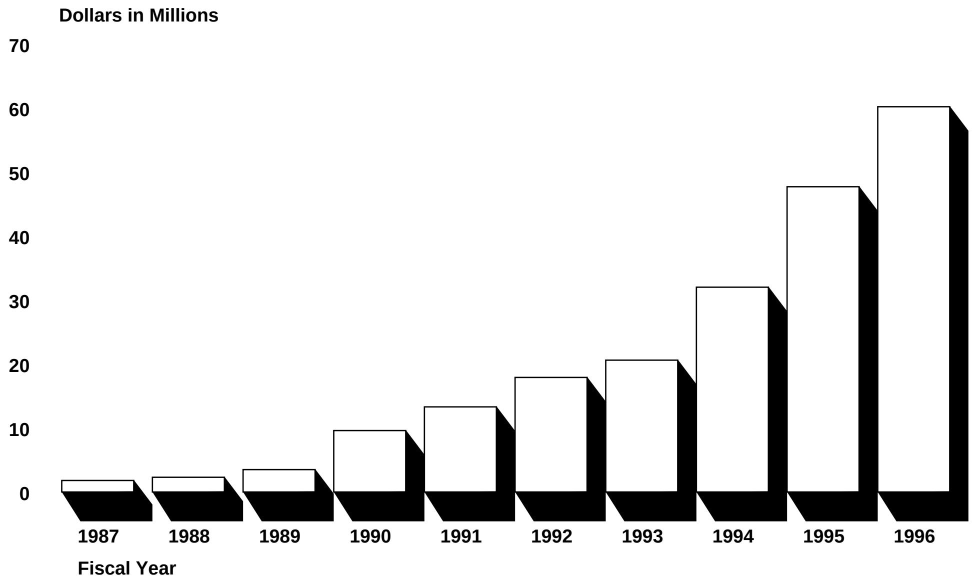
Amtrak's Outstanding Debt/Capital Lease Obligations, Fiscal Years 1987-96



Note: Amounts are in current year dollars.

Source: Amtrak.

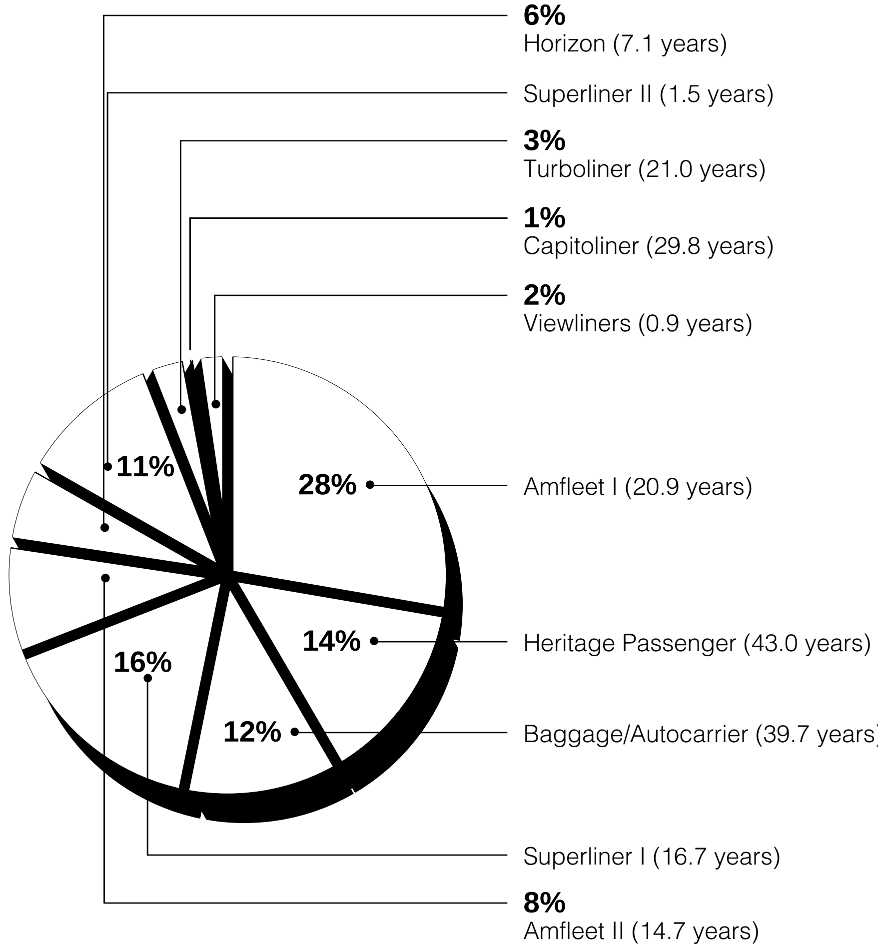
Amtrak's Interest Expense, Fiscal Years 1987-96



Note: Amounts are in current year dollars.

Source: Amtrak.

Average Age of Amtrak's Car Fleet, October 1996

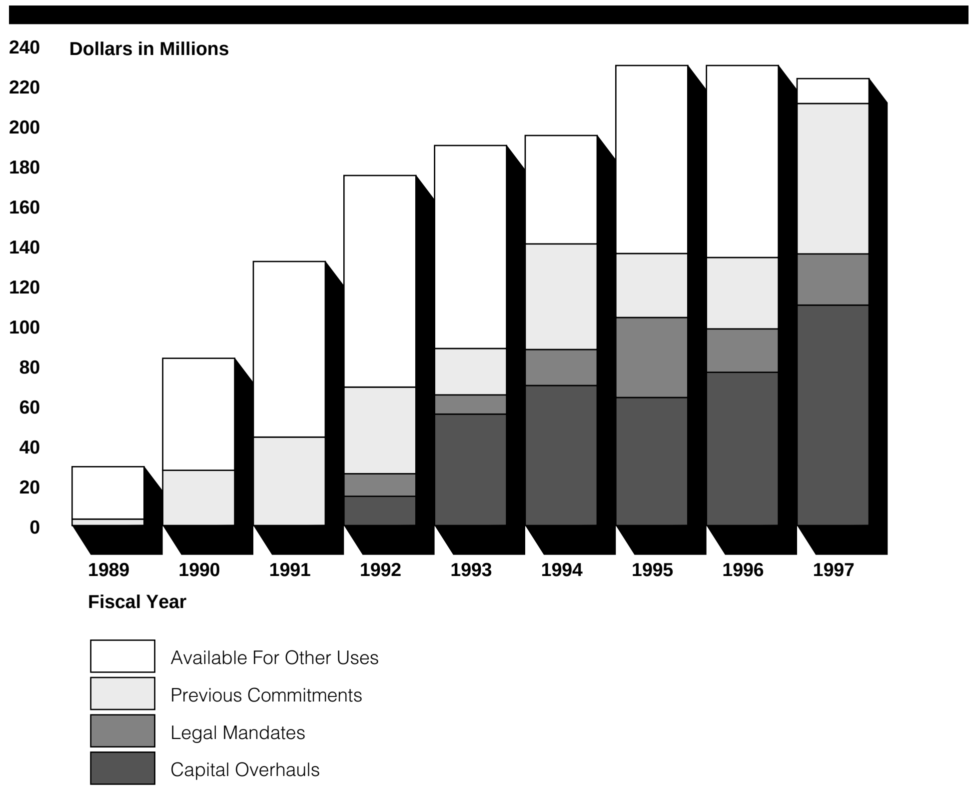


Notes: The data exclude mail-handling cars and road railers.

The age of the baggage and autocarrier cars is a weighted average.

Source: GAO's analysis of Amtrak's data.

Commitments of Amtrak's Federal Capital Funds, Fiscal Years 1989-97



Notes: The amount "available for other uses" is that portion of the capital grant not already committed for specific requirements at the beginning of the fiscal year. This figure does not include capital grants for the Northeast Corridor Improvement Program.

Amounts for fiscal year 1997 are estimated.

Source: GAO's analysis of Amtrak's data.

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