

HB 2603 – Rail report – Passenger train delays

I can't tell you how many times I've heard from constituents – and a few colleagues – about being on a passenger train delayed because of freight traffic: a freight train moving slowly, or entirely stopped. But even if you or your district aren't using passenger rail, you still might care about this. Maybe you've heard from constituents about waiting for a *really long* train to pass through an at-grade crossing. That may be about to get worse.

We expect better, and federal law is even on our side. To address congestion, to be responsive to people commuting for school or work, to provide a system of transportation options, we need passenger train service to get better – a lot better. But this problem seems intractable. What's the cause? We have some theories, but to figure out solutions we need facts.

“Freight Train Interference” incidents are logged. Amtrak trains sometimes wait for an opposing train, or catch up to a slower freight train that hasn't moved on to a siding, for example. Maybe rail congestion is a problem, or less-than-ideal scheduling and dispatcher unfamiliarity with the terrain, or lack of frequency or appropriately-sized sidings.

Testimony in the Joint Transportation Committee raised a number of troubling issues, and not just about the impact on passenger trains. Very long freight trains have begun to delay other shorter freight trains, too. Some of these longer freight trains are so long they can't fit in any of the rail sidings available on the rail system in Oregon, which further exacerbates delays to other trains. Trains that were once 5,000 to 7,000 feet long are now routinely even longer, up to 10,000 feet—that's about 1.9 (almost 2) milesⁱ. When in motion, these trains take longer to pass through speed restriction track, and when they have to slow down or stop, they require a lot more time to get back up to speed. Other issues at the hearing included tying up at-grade crossings – that can impact most of our districts - and raised safety concerns related to inability to communicate between the front and rear of the train.

ODOT statistics show unacceptably low on-time passenger rail performance this year: 50 percent in January and 60.1 percent in February, way down from a year ago this timeⁱⁱ. Freight train interference reported in January was exceptionally bad, totaling 1,260 minutes. The delays experienced during the first two months of 2019 exemplify the reasoning behind this bill –to better understand the interference and the various causes.

This bill is simple: it asks ODOT to study the problem and report back to the legislature. That's it. More Oregonians are expressing an interest in commuting by train - but without faster times and more options, they're stuck - and we're stuck. Let's get some facts and start working on solutions.

Thank you.

ⁱ [Last June, Union Pacific issued system-wide instructions with provisions permitting trains as long as 18,000 feet. Nationally, the freight railroads seem to be trending toward ever-longer trains as they seek to reduce operating costs.]

ⁱⁱ This compares with 71.4 percent and 80.9 percent for the same months in 2018.