

Testimony of Dr. Catherine L. Ross
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Senate Surface Transportation and Merchant Marine Subcommittee
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Thank you, Madame Chairman, and thank you, Senator Cleland, for the opportunity to come before you today and talk about continuing support for Amtrak and the rebirth of rail passenger travel in our states and metropolitan areas, particularly our experience in Georgia.

Amtrak serves an important purpose to our nation's states and regions working on developing inter-city rail, particularly in areas like Georgia that currently have no intercity rail at all within the state. We look to them for the expertise and advice, and leadership for high-speed rail development.

The Georgia Legislature created the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, at the direction of Governor Roy Barnes, less than a year ago. We are charged with relieving congestion and reducing pollution in the 13-county region that is in non-attainment for air quality. Part of our core mission is to provide the Atlanta region transportation choices, and commuter rail expansion is a large part of our plan.

I am proud to tell you today that in-state passenger rail is getting back on track in Georgia, and we expect to provide Georgia's inter-city commuters a real choice in rail by 2003 – about 30 years since the famed train, the “Nancy Hanks”, linking Atlanta and Macon to Savannah, was decommissioned. For too long, Atlanta literally buried its passenger railroads by building its downtown automobile viaducts and highways on top of its famous rail yards and relying solely on the automobile for surface transportation. Atlanta is still Terminus, its original namesake, only for passenger air travel.

But we can no longer keep up with surging growth in Georgia by adding more concrete ribbons to our landscape. Our people want transportation choices that are convenient, reliable, affordable and that protect our quality of life. Soon, Atlanta and greater Georgia will be known for their 21st Century rail network. Following the creation of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority last year, Georgia took a new look at its transportation needs for the 21st century, and saw a number of factors that could point toward a passenger rail revival.

For one thing, GRTA is committed to providing more transportation choices in the Atlanta region, including new roads, car pool lanes, express buses and vanpools. Rail service is an important part of the mix that is required for an efficient, seamless transportation system. Buses could carry riders to suburban rail stations, and commuter trains could connect with the existing the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority rail line.

Second, linking Georgia's cities by rail could spur economic development in areas of our state that are not growing as rapidly as the Atlanta region. Rail access to Hartsfield International Airport, for example, could help attract new industry to middle Georgia.

Finally, there is a national trend toward expanded rail service. Recent analysis by the US Conference of Mayors finds that 47 of the nation's 50 largest metro areas are in the planning phase of some type of rail investment, and in 17 areas rail projects are now under construction. In total, about 200 projects are in the planning, engineering, or construction phase throughout the nation.

Amtrak will soon start operating high-speed trains in the Northeast, and Amtrak president George Warrington said he envisions Atlanta as a regional hub for high-speed rail. That would significantly boost our efforts to establish intra-state rail passenger service in Georgia.

I would like to emphasize two roles among several that the Amtrak Reform Council has

identified for Amtrak: 1) to be a potential contractor for commuter rail services and 2) to contribute to Federal policymaking for the nation's intercity rail passenger system. I believe those are important roles for Amtrak in assisting the development of commuter rail service in the United States.

States from every region of the country face similar problems as we do with traffic congestion and pollution, and are equally interested in commuter and intercity passenger rail service. We all suffer from growing pollution, and growing highway and airport gridlock. We all recognize that Amtrak can play an important role in helping solve our problems.

That's why states and regions are making substantial investments in passenger rail. Let me offer a few examples.

On October 1, 1999, Wisconsin, Illinois and Michigan announced that, in partnership with Amtrak, they will develop a plan to purchase new rail equipment capable of traveling 110 m.p.h. to operate in 3 Midwest passenger rail corridors.

On February 1, 2000, transportation officials from states in federally-designated high speed corridors announced at a Congressional briefing that they are forming a coalition of states to support intercity passenger rail and the development of high-speed corridors. The coalition now has 12 states and hopes to sign up 24 more.

Nine Midwestern states, in cooperation with the Federal Railroad Administration, are working on the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative – a plan to improve intercity passenger rail service throughout the Midwest.

In November 1999, Amtrak and the Pennsylvania DOT announced a \$140 million agreement to fund improvements on the Philadelphia to Harrisburg Keystone corridor.

In California, Amtrak has invested \$125 million – its largest state investment ever – for new trains for the San Diego – San Luis Obispo rail corridor. Altogether, California and Amtrak have invested \$500 million over the past 10 years to improve service on the South California and Central Coast routes.

Along the Gulf Coast, Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama are working on plans to improve service along the federally-designated Gulf Coast high-speed rail corridor.

The Georgi

perspective, is the spark of interest in passenger rail across the state and the emerging belief that people *can* have transportation choices.

Institutionally, we are also making our mark in Georgia. Late last year, the state formed an interagency team to supervise the development of a rail passenger network in the state. The Program Management Team, or PMT, for the Georgia Rail Passenger Program comprises two board members each from the Georgia Department of Transportation, the Georgia Passenger Rail Authority and the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority. Governor Barnes asked Walter “Sonny” Deriso, a GRTA board member from Southwest Georgia, to chair this team.

The PMT’s rail consultants are proceeding with studies of the potential for commuter rail operations in the Atlanta region and throughout the state. A 5,000-mile network of railroads crisscrosses the State of Georgia, providing an excellent opportunity to establish a passenger rail network. A previous exhaustive study of passenger travel by mode and trip preference surveys found that Georgians would make about seven to 10 million trips a year by passenger rail if it were provided at a reasonable cost, was reliable and provided a frequency of service to meet travel needs.

The current Intrastate Rail Plan anticipates moving 1.6 million passengers a year by the year 2020 on seven lines with 15 stations and 790 miles of upgraded railroads. The Atlanta Commuter Rail Plan would expect to carry between 6 and 8 million passengers a year by 2010 with trains on six lines and 39 stations.

Clearly, interest in intercity passenger rail is not confined to a single state or region. It’s a national movement, and deserves to be addressed at the national level. That’s why groups like the National Governors’ Association, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities, the Council of State Governments and the National Council of State Legislatures are all urging Congress to give the states more flexibility for passenger rail.

Madame Chairman, I hope my testimony today has made it clear why Georgia, and many states other states as well, look to intercity passenger rail to help us solve some of our most serious transportation problems, and why we look to Congress to facilitate state partnerships with Amtrak.

Thank you.