



**U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE & TRANSPORTATION**
Senator Maria Cantwell, Chair

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

**U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Nominations Hearing**

Nominees:

**David Michael Capozzi, Director of Amtrak Board of Directors; Anthony Rosario
Coscia, Director of the Amtrak Board of Directors;
Christopher Koos, Director of the Amtrak Board of Directors;
Samuel E. Lathem, Director of Amtrak Board of Directors;
Robin Lee Wiessmann, Director of the Amtrak Board of Directors;
Robert E. Primus, Member of Surface Transportation Board**

September 7, 2022

Opening Remarks

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Senator Cantwell: Good morning everyone. The U.S. Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation will come to order. I'm pleased to welcome Amtrak and Surface Transportation Board nominees and their families here today.

You are all here in a particularly challenging time for both passenger rail and freight rail in our country. But we have great promise for the future and investment.

Amtrak is a central transportation provider for communities across the nation. From the Northeast Corridor to the Pacific Northwest, Amtrak connects rural and urban communities in an environmentally friendly way.

Passenger Rail burns 83% fewer greenhouse emissions than driving, and up to 73% fewer emissions than flying.

And Amtrak is facing historical challenges but also opportunities, which can help Amtrak expanded services and help meet those passenger demands of the future.

The railroad is still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and its peak Amtrak ridership was down 97% due to COVID-19. Thankfully, ridership has significantly

recovered from that point and is projected to be at 70% of pre-pandemic levels this year.

However, Amtrak still struggles to restore routes or service was reduced during the pandemic. This includes the Amtrak Cascades route, which will have a service partially restored from Seattle to Vancouver, British Columbia, later this month, but it needs to be brought back to full pre-pandemic service levels. I can't tell you how important this is for the economy of our region.

Additionally, the infrastructure law provided \$66 billion investment in rail with \$22 billion going to Amtrak to purchase new rail cars, and improve stations, and upgrade tracks to enhance the passenger experience and improve reliability.

Ensuring these funds are managed wisely will be the responsibility of Amtrak Board nominees here today. Each nominee has a unique set of skills and experiences that will help guide Amtrak to meet the challenges of today and the future.

The nominees before us today are Anthony Coscia, who has served on the Amtrak Board since 2010, and is currently chair of the board.

Mr. David Capozzi, who is former director of U.S. Access Board and will ensure Amtrak is meeting its responsibilities to provide quality service to people with disabilities.

Mr. Chris Koos who was nominated for this role last Congress and currently serves as Mayor of Normal, Illinois, which is served by Amtrak's Cardinal route.

And Mr. Samuel Latham, who was the first African American to be elected to the president of the Delaware State AFL-CIO and currently serves on the board of the Delaware River Bay Authority.

And Ms. Robin Wiessmann, who currently serves as the executive director of the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency.

Lastly, Mr. Robert Primus has been re-nominated as the member of the Surface Transportation Board. This Surface Transportation Board provides critical roles in overseeing our freight rail industry, which is currently struggling with nationwide service issues caused by pandemic issues of disruption, increased freight demand, and labor shortages.

It is essential that our freight rail system become a resilient system able to meet the demands of today and the future. Freight shipments are expected to increase by 10% by 2030, and by 43% by 2050. However, at a time of increasing freight volumes, rail industry shipment volumes fell 3.2% in June of this year, in large part due to service issues. These service issues have impacted everyone from grain growers in the Midwest sending grain to the West Coast, to residents of Snohomish, and Skagit, and island counties who struggle with shipping issues themselves.

So, the Surface Transportation Board has to work with the railroads to reverse these trends, and to make sure that we have the staffing to make sure the system can deliver the services it is scoped to do.

Thankfully, Mr. Primus has already proven himself to be an effective board member over the past two years and has worked to ensure that disputes between shippers and railroads are handled fairly and transparently while pushing the board to meet the rail industry's present day challenges.

So, I look forward to hearing from all the nominees about the challenges we face in our rail transportation and meeting the needs of the American people.

Question & Answer

[VIDEO]

Senator Cantwell: Thank you. Thank you very much. I think I'd like to start with you, Mr. Coscia, if I could, will we restore the Seattle to Vancouver, British Columbia service this month?

Coscia: Sure, that is a distinct possibility, although there are some sort of final arrangements that need to be made in order for that to happen. Certainly our expectation is that by the end of the year that would happen. But we are working very, very hard at trying to make that date sooner as possible.

Senator Cantwell: What is the issue with restoring that date? Because we've kind of made announcements it's going to be restored, and then I would have said that was an easy yes that you were going to give me. And so I get that when you're talking about service, you want to be accurate. I get that part, but...

Coscia: As you know, in the recovery from the pandemic, we've had to face many, many challenges. I, frankly, was very tempted to give you a very quick yes, but our experience since recovering from the pandemic shows us that we need to be incredibly cautious about the commitments that we make in terms of being able to meet them, given some of the variables we can't control. But our feeling is that we're able to get both the workforce and the commitments in place and hopefully within the next 30 days that would be possible. But I could not tell you today that that's an absolute certainty.

Cantwell: Well, I'm glad you brought up this very important word, because I'm not sure that I heard many of the nominees talk about this, and that is the issue of workforce. So this is the critical issue. And I think that when we're talking about this service, which means so much economically to our regions. I mean, when I think about the Gulf Coast, I have to put in a word because my colleague mentioned it, I am very supportive of reestablishing of that service, it has been way too long for us not to have that established.

So, we had a pandemic and we had disruption of services in key areas across the West. And my colleague, I'm sure, from Montana will show up at some point in time and talk about that. So I think what we need, what I need, before I can support any of the nominees before us today is a commitment for us to come up with a workforce strategy and plan that allows us to continue. We cannot simply say we don't have enough conductors, we don't have enough baggage handlers, we don't have enough this... The public believes they survived the pandemic so now they want to see the services restored.

And we all have workforce issues. Everybody in America has workforce issues. But what I didn't hear enough of is what does Amtrak believe they need to do about that to get the services reestablished that we need in America? So I'm a big fan, you know, of

the Amtrak services. I don't know if any of the other board nominees want to talk about workforce issues or what you think Amtrak needs to do on that front? Mr. Koos?

Koos: I would just say that it does require some patience. We're seeing it in my community with issues of construction materials, things like that. I would agree with Mr. Coscia on the fact that it's hard to pin a date on things. And I've found as a mayor that you don't announce a date until you've got a pair of scissors in your hand and ready to cut a ribbon. Because it's really, really difficult to plan how things are going to happen.

But the need for workforce training is a huge issue. We're seeing it, our community colleges is stepping up trying to train people, but it takes time. And there are a lot of people that realize this is an issue to be dealt with and are working very hard on it.

Cantwell: Well, I'm very serious about this, because I saw the disruption of the service and had to press Amtrak on it as it related to Montana. And what was it about? It was about conductors. And then what it what was it about? It was about getting a schedule of conductors and making it work. And now if we're saying we are delaying the Seattle to Vancouver service again because of not having baggage handlers on the Canadian side...these are all problems that affect the public this is—I guess I just want to say, we're not messing around here. We're not messing around here when it comes to the reestablishing [of] these services.

So, I hope that the nominees will give a lot of thought to what are we going to do to make sure that we have a workforce to deliver these services and get about this task of expansion? If I could...

Coscia: Senator, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but if I can just expand on the point you just made, because I think there's two things that I wanted to point out. One is that you make an absolutely excellent point about the fact that in order to recruit the people we need to operate the services, we've got to think way outside the box from what we normally did. And we are doing that. And I say this to sort of respond to your need for an a commitment, certainly for me and I think others would share this, that we are doing things that we've never done as a company before, in terms of the recruiting process, going right down to the idea of working with different unions to create apprenticeship programs. We've done job fairs in a host of cities around the country. And it has created great results.

As I mentioned in my testimony, we've already hired 2,800 people since the beginning of this fiscal year, our target number is 4,000. And we think we're well on the way toward bringing a lot more people into it. And to sort of get back to that the reason why I was being cautious about my response in connection with sort of restarting the Cascades is that our start date, which is literally in the information that we circulate among ourselves, is to begin one frequency on September 26.

Now, I know because I'm ultimately responsible as the chair that we will meet that date, and we will do everything that is humanly possible to do that. But I also know that we

have had disruptions in the past. But you should rest assured that we are committed to a very aggressive recruitment program that we think has already shown very positive results, and that we're committed to restoring the Cascade service and expect that by the 26th at least one frequency will be back in service.

Cantwell: Thank you.