

Witness Testimony of
Honorable Chris Koos
Mayor, Town of Normal, IL

Before the
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate

Nominations Hearing

Thursday, August 6th, 2020
10:00 am, Room 253
Russell Senate Office Building

Introduction:

Chairman Wicker, Ranking Member Cantwell, and distinguished Members of the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am Chris Koos, and I have proudly served as the Mayor of the Town of Normal, Illinois since 2003. I am deeply honored to have been nominated by the President to serve on the Amtrak Board of Directors. If confirmed, I hope to bring my experience as a mayor, small business owner, and frequent Amtrak customer to the Board of Directors.

These experiences have instilled in me the belief that passenger rail is a necessary investment that increases mobility, promotes economic growth, and improves the quality of life for all communities served. I have seen the positive impact of passenger rail firsthand in Normal, which is served by Amtrak at Uptown Station. Our intermodal passenger rail station is the second busiest in Illinois, with 238,626 boardings and alightings in FY18. The station has been key to revitalizing the Town of Normal's central business district. This revitalization would not have happened if the business community and political leaders in the region did not recognize the importance of intercity passenger rail and transit-oriented development.

I have a deep respect for the organization, its history, and its employees, who are committed to making Amtrak a convenient and reliable travel option for all Americans. I believe that a healthy national passenger rail system will be crucial to solving many of the toughest problems we face today as a Nation. From providing a viable addition to our transportation network, fighting climate change to creating new and sustainable jobs, Amtrak must be a part of the solution.

About Normal:

The town of Normal was originally founded as a railroad town in 1865. The Town is located in McLean County in Central Illinois; adjacent to the City of Bloomington. We sit at the crossroads of two major Midwestern cities: Chicago and St. Louis. Normal is about 120 miles southwest of Chicago and 160 miles northeast of St. Louis.

Normal is home to Illinois State University, which is Illinois' oldest public university. Our community is also home to Heartland Community College, Illinois Wesleyan University, and Lincoln College. We pride ourselves on being a business-friendly community. You can find businesses such as State Farm Insurance, Growmark Inc., COUNTRY Financial, and Rivian, an exciting and visionary American automaker developing and manufacturing next generation electric vehicles, in Normal, Illinois

Amtrak's Impact on Bloomington-Normal:

The Bloomington-Normal community is served by two Amtrak routes: *The Texas Eagle*, a long-distance line, and the *Lincoln Service*, a state-supported line. *The Texas Eagle* connects Chicago to St. Louis, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio. *The Lincoln Service* provides even more frequent service between Chicago and St. Louis.

In 2010, Normal was awarded one of the first TIGER, now known as BUILD, grants in the nation for the redevelopment of Uptown Station in downtown Normal. The \$46 million dollar project, which received \$22 million from the TIGER grant, \$11 million in additional federal funding, and more than \$13 million in state and local contributions, was the first TIGER grant project in the nation to break ground and begin construction.

As Mayor of Normal, I was a part of a partnership between the federal government, the State of Illinois, local contractors, and local unions; all focused on delivering a high-quality facility on time and within budget. We met that goal in 2012, less than two years after breaking ground. The redeveloped Uptown Station included a new Amtrak station, space for public transit and regional buses, three stories of office space now used by the Town of Normal, and parking lots for visitors and commuters. The station is also adjacent to the Constitution Trail, which is a rail-to-trail conversion running through Normal and Bloomington and offering safe pedestrian walkways as well as bike lanes and new bike infrastructure. Finally, a dangerous five-way intersection was transformed into a significantly safer green roundabout. The roundabout has become an attractive public space and diverts thousands of gallons of untreated stormwater from nearby creeks.

The Uptown Station construction project was an incredible success and a testament to the importance of intercity rail and transit-oriented development in our cities and towns, no matter the size. The transportation center created hundreds of jobs during its two-year construction period (nearly 140,000 hours of work for construction workers). This meant good-paying jobs for ironworkers, electricians, bricklayers, plumbers, sprinkler fitters, and sheet metal workers throughout the region.

The project also created many indirect jobs. Private spinoff development anchored by the new station totaled at \$175 million, in investments in new housing and construction. The project has also brought a new Children's Discovery Museum, two hotels, and a conference center to Normal. Thanks to Amtrak's Bloomington-Normal Station, our success is still playing out. We

continue to attract new jobs, residents, and retail dollars to the community without contributing to sprawl.

In addition to the incredible economic growth the Town has seen since the redevelopment of Uptown Station, Normal has received the US EPA's 2011 National Award for Smart Growth Achievement in the category of Civic Places for the Uptown Normal Roundabout. Uptown Station also received a LEED Silver certification for its environmentally responsible and efficient construction and design.

Success in Partnerships:

I believe that the key to the success of Uptown's redevelopment has been our philosophy of partnership and engagement with federal agencies, elected officials, the private sector, and the community. I believe that positive unified relationships between all stakeholders are key to the future success of intercity passenger rail in the United States. This means support for passenger rail at both the federal and state level as well as support from private developers, labor groups, and the residents of the community.

The Uptown Station project would not have been completed on time and within budget without the support of all stakeholders. All of our stakeholders agreed that a redeveloped Amtrak station would provide better access to jobs and educational opportunities while spurring transit-oriented development.

The Future of Amtrak:

As much as I admire Amtrak, I recognize that the organization faces a number of challenges that I would hope to focus on if my appointment to the Board of Directors is confirmed. As a member of the Board, I would reaffirm my support for long-distance passenger rail. My community is served by both state-supported and long-distance lines. I recognize the importance of long-distance train travel for many of my constituents, who are often unable to travel by plane, bus, or car. Amtrak plays a major role in the mobility and independence of the disability community; this cannot be ignored.

As a Director, I would be a strong ally to the disability community. I was shocked when Amtrak made news in January after asking two wheelchair-users to pay \$25,000 to ride from Chicago to Normal's Uptown Station. The normal price for that ticket would be \$16. I understand that former Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson committed to improving accessibility on Amtrak trains and properties through a comprehensive review of current accessibility policies. We need to go above and beyond the bare minimum for our passengers with disabilities. This means upgrading and purchasing rolling stock to better suit the needs of disabled passengers as well as upgrading station infrastructure, to make the Amtrak experience accessible and reliable for all passengers.

In order to make passenger rail an effective transportation option, we need to significantly improve on-time-performance (OTP). This means introducing new metrics and standards as well as holding freight companies accountable for following agreed-upon timetables.

I am also invested in making Amtrak a safer system. I would use my position as a Director on the Board to advocate for safer rail crossings. Improved grade-separation and right-of-way improvements have helped create safer conditions, decreased travel times, and improved OTP, while increasing ridership in our town. I believe that this should be replicated in communities across the United States. Finally, in order to ensure the safety of all passengers, we need to reach 100% PTC implementation on all route miles throughout the U.S.

If confirmed, I look forward to tackling these challenges, and whatever challenges present themselves in the future. I, as well as the entire Bloomington-Normal community, understand firsthand the benefits of intercity passenger rail as well as the costs associated with a failing system, such as traffic congestion, lowered property values, and increased greenhouse emissions. I believe that Amtrak must be a part of the solution when addressing these issues which affect almost every single American.

In closing, I again thank President Trump and Secretary Chao for their confidence in my ability to serve on the Amtrak Board of Directors. I hope to have the opportunity to work closely with the Members and staff of this Committee as well as the entire Congress to create a more effective and efficient passenger rail system.