



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

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Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Amtrak and NTSB Nominations Hearing

June 21, 2023

Nominees:

Joel Szabat to be a Director of the Amtrak Board of Directors
Anthony Coscia to be a Director of the Amtrak Board of Directors
Christopher Koos to be a Director of the Amtrak Board of Directors
Alvin Brown to be a Member of the National Transportation Safety Board

Opening Statement

[VIDEO](#)

CANTWELL: Good morning. I am pleased to welcome the Amtrak and National Transportation Safety Board nominees and their families.

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

But the pandemic took a toll on Amtrak with ridership down 97 percent due to COVID-19. Thankfully, ridership has significantly improved from the recovery and companies projected to be back at pre-pandemic ridership levels next year.

I especially want to thank Amtrak for working with me to fully restore the Amtrak Cascades service in my home state of Washington and Oregon earlier this year. As ridership nears full recovery, Amtrak can focus its attention on expanding service and improving the consumer experience.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provided a historic \$66 billion investment in rail, which will be used to purchase new passenger railcars for Amtrak Cascades and provide more opportunities for states to expand.

Ensuring these funds benefit the entire nation is important to us and we'll hear about transportation across our northern tier states and wanting to make sure that service there is fully operational. A very important aspect I know to Senator Tester, and to myself, and to many others who want access to our national parks.

While we are moving forward with this hearing on nominees, I encourage both the White House and Minority Leader McConnell to work together to ensure that these nominees put forward to the Senate meet the requirements of the law and the country.

These nominees are no strangers to the Committee. This is the third time the nominees have been before Congress so hopefully we can get you over the goal line.

The Amtrak nominees before us today are: Mr. Anthony Coscia, who served on the Amtrak Board and is the current chair since 2010; Mayor Koos, who I hear about all the time from my friend Senator Durbin, currently serves as the Mayor of Normal, Illinois; Mr. Szabat, who recently retired from a long career in federal service, including as the Undersecretary for Policy at the Department of Transportation under then Secretary Chao.

We are also going to hear this morning from Mr. Alvin Brown who is nominated by the President as a Member of the National Transportation Safety Board, and is the nation's safety watchdog, ensuring that both the transportation industry and the Department of Transportation are putting safety first, investigating civil transportation accidents, and providing recommendations that Congress can act on to improve safety.

Mr. Brown, has had a long career in public policy, starting when he worked for then Sen. Nelson. But as former Mayor of Jacksonville, Florida, which is I'm familiar with your record, provides a unique perspective on transportation safety issues that the city had to deal with. And I think that will be beneficial as we require the NTSB to play a larger role in communicating important safety needs of our nation. Additionally, as the Mayor of the nation's 11th largest city, he managed thousands of employees and a budget of nearly \$2 billion. So his unique experience will be helpful at NTSB at retaining a workforce that needs to have the technical expertise that is important in a rapidly changing, technological sector like transportation is today.

Q and A VIDEO

CANTWELL: And now we'll go to questions for the nominees. I'll jump in right here with the Pacific Northwest corridor that had service reestablished and to the pre-pandemic levels, but staffing was a major issue. And so I really want to know from each of the nominees, what you think we need to do to make sure that we are upgrading staffing?

I want to understand too what we are doing to add more capacity to those Pacific Northwest routes between Seattle and Portland, by the fall of this year? And on safety, I want to understand ... after the DuPont accident in Washington that killed three people and injured [more than] 60, Amtrak instituted a safety management system, very important for improving safety culture, but they were designed to ensure that they addressed the new risks.

I'm concerned about an inspector general report from December that found Amtrak had lacked security practices and led to former employees selling keys to sensitive areas on the internet. It is critical that Amtrak ensure that safety is the number one priority.

So, if each of you could address those issues to the degree that you are involved or knowledgeable.

COSCIA: Chair Cantwell, I'll begin for obvious reasons that my current tenure at Amtrak gives me, I guess, the ability to respond directly to some of the issues you raised. And frankly, those are all issues that are very important to the board, and to me personally, and for which we've spent a considerable amount of time.

First, to sort of address your question about workforce, and in particular, having the adequate staffing to create the increased levels of capacity and in our Pacific Northwest service.

The need to hire qualified people to work at Amtrak and to operate the nation's railroad system has been an absolute priority. And we have committed an enormous amount of effort to recruiting and training and finding people who can make a career, which we believe is a very promising basis for a career as part of the national rail system.

CANTWELL: Do you think this is key to getting services expanded or reestablished?

COSCIA: I think it is. But I'm I guess I'm here to report to you, what I think is good news in the sense that in the last fiscal year, we were able to hire 3,700 new employees to Amtrak to restore much of what was lost as a result of the pandemic in normal attrition. And in this fiscal year, we've already hired 2,700 additional employees to give us the full complement to restore that service.

Specific to the Northwest service, we are very deeply into the specific training program to train people on that territory to be able to put into effect the two additional frequencies

that we expect to put into effect. And I'm confident and can commit to you today that we will meet the deadline to do that. And that we have the adequate resources to do it. Because of the work we've done in the last 12 months of recruiting and building a workforce.

CANTWELL: Safety management systems.

COSICA: We, you know, I will tell you that the lessons and the issues surrounding Train 501 are very deeply ingrained in my mind and in my heart. I know that nominee Brown has a very important task.

And safety is our top priority. We have initiated a number of different issues relative to adopting an overall safety management system, that as you know, you're never done with developing a full safety management system.

We have affected the training from the most senior executives, to the people in the field, all of whom have helped us to create what we believe to be a safety culture where people are not afraid to speak up where there's an issue that they noticed. Where the people are not punished for bringing up safety issues that need to be addressed. And we're adapting the use of modern technology to allow us to train people better the use of simulators the use of different training protocols, all of which I think have put us in a position of creating a much safer railroad.

And the early indications are that our numbers are supporting that, including the very low number of incidents.

CANTWELL: Mr. Szabat, do you would you make workforce a priority and safety management system culture a priority and reestablishing service?

SZABAT: Senator Cantwell, yes I would. I think staffing both quantity and quality of employees is key and essential to increase service. And I believe that increased service is essential if we want to get Amtrak back to operating in the black. So all those things tied together.

On the safety side, if confirmed, I and my colleagues who will be on the Board of Directors, will not be management. So there's a distinction there of what our roles are for culture, I mean, for safety. But I'll echo what Chairman Coscia said about the culture. An appropriate role for the Board of Directors is to ensure that we have a culture of safety so that the experts that are brought on board to Amtrak feel comfortable moving forward to say, we have these challenges that need to be addressed, and no one is afraid for their career or more further position, if they're reporting safety challenges that need to be addressed.

CANTWELL: Thank you.