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September 16, 2022

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U.S. Department of Transportation
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ATTN: Docket No. FRA-2022-0064

Re: Interstate Rail Compacts Grant Program created by Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) appreciates the opportunity to provide a comment to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) regarding the Interstate Rail Compacts Grant Program. From its beginnings nearly 200 years ago, the railroad network has been a critical component of the nation's transportation system and has provided a foundation for the movement of people and goods throughout the country. The Interstate Rail Compacts Grant Program will help sustain this fundamental part of the nation's transportation infrastructure. Furthermore, ASCE was an ardent supporter of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), and views it as a privilege to comment on one of the programs created by this landmark piece of legislation. The input presented in this document is in response to a request for information (RFI) published by the FRA on August 19th in the Federal Register.

Founded in 1852, ASCE is the nation's oldest engineering society. ASCE represents more than 150,000 members of the civil engineering profession in 177 countries. ASCE's members operate in a number of different disciplines, including the expansive sector of transportation. As the professionals who plan, design, construct, and operate society's built environment, ASCE is in a position to offer perspective on some of the needs associated with the nation's rail system.

ASCE hailed the enactment of the IIJA as a once-in-a-generation investment in our nation's infrastructure with the potential to improve safety and modernize the transportation system. Furthermore, ASCE recognizes the merits of the Interstate Rail Compacts Grant Program, which offers financial assistance to interstate rail compacts (IRCs) to strengthen their capability to advance intercity passenger rail service. IRCs play an important role in promoting intercity passenger rail projects while also serving as a way for member states to fulfill regional needs. The FRA's program can offer valuable assistance in funding the technical and administrative functions of IRCs as well as supporting coordination and promotional activities for regional rail service.

As highways, dedicated roadways, transit hubs, and airspace connecting communities and economic centers across the U.S. become increasingly congested and crowded, investments in rail infrastructure can play a critical role in intercity passenger transportation. Additionally, rail represents a sustainable,

equitable, and energy-efficient means of transportation that offers increased protection to the natural environment.

ASCE stands ready to assist the FRA as it implements the Interstate Rail Compacts Grant Program and appreciates the opportunity to offer perspective. For these comments, ASCE and its members include a focus on **frameworks and planning studies, state-level investment, and investment in new infrastructure.**

ASCE's 2021 Report Card for America's Infrastructure

Every four years, ASCE publishes its *Report Card for America's Infrastructure*, which grades the nation's major infrastructure categories using an A to F school report card format. The most recent report card¹, released in March 2021, evaluated 17 categories of infrastructure and reflected an overall C- grade.

Rail received a B in 2021, the highest category grade on the Report Card. Despite this strong grade, challenges remain for rail, particularly in the passenger sector. While freight rail maintains a strong network buoyed by direct shipper fees, passenger rail relies on government investment. Plagued by a lack of federal support, there is a current state of good repair backlog of \$45.2 billion.

The Interstate Rail Compacts Grant Program directly supports ASCE's Report Card recommendation to encourage passenger rail infrastructure investment in high-population centers and support continued investment for state-supported routes. Added capacity and expanded service in high-density markets can relieve system stress on other modes.

Frameworks and planning studies

In the request for information, the FRA asks if providing a framework for the sequencing of eligible activities be helpful. ASCE's response to this question is "yes", as these frameworks can help IRCs identify key actions and plan to use resources to carry out those actions. The RFI points out the development of a regional rail planning study as a first deliverable could be helpful. ASCE agrees with this assessment, and includes sustaining the planning for Northeast Corridor investments as a recommendation in the Report Card.

One of the activities eligible under the Interstate Rail Compacts Grant Program is systems planning, including consideration of the impact on freight operations and ridership. Systems planning is important for maximizing investment and improving the flow of both travelers and goods. ASCE recommends funding regional freight rail investment plans, which can support efficient operation and reduce delays by eliminating bottlenecks. These systems plans should adequately address proper intermodal operational coordination.

The FRA also asks how it should measure performance for the activities involved in systems planning, promotion of intercity passenger rail operations, preparation of applications for competitive federal grant programs, and operations coordination. It is important to include measures that adequately address the need for appropriate intermodal connections, including links to highways, transit hubs, intercity bus systems, and airports.

¹ <https://infrastructurereportcard.org/>

State investment in rail infrastructure

Rail is a safe and energy-efficient means of transportation that will continue to play a critical role in intercity travel as highways become increasingly congested. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, high-speed rail has been successful in the Northeast Corridor, connecting regions between Washington, D.C., and Boston with over 18.8 million annual passenger trips. Over 5.7 million passenger trips per year take place on California's three intercity corridors, making these routes the busiest in the U.S. after the Northeast Corridor. In 2019, Amtrak's network carried 32.5 million riders to more than 500 destinations across 46 states and Washington, D.C.

As ridership continues to recover from lows brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, state involvement will be essential in ensuring passenger rail service runs efficiently. State governments, and the compacts formed between them, can play a large role in facilitating passenger rail service at a regional level. Unlike long-distance passenger rail, regional rail service has the potential to be competitive with airlines in terms of travel times. Cooperation and information-sharing between states is key, particularly because some states may have more experience with rail operations than others.

ASCE encourages the use of innovative financing methods to increase funding for both passenger and freight rail, such as revenue bonds and tax-exempt financing at the state, regional, and local levels, public-private partnerships, and state infrastructure banks. While state investment is important, it cannot be the sole revenue source supporting intercity rail. Federal support is also necessary. The IIJA provides \$66 billion for rail infrastructure over the next five years, representing the largest investment in passenger rail in the past 50 years. While the infrastructure law's funding is a much-needed down payment to upgrade aging facilities and expand transportation systems, more investment is needed if we intend to resolve the nation's current infrastructure investment gap of \$2.59 trillion over 10 years.

Investment in new infrastructure

In addition to improving the condition of the existing rail network, states should invest in new passenger rail infrastructure. The development of the Interstate Highway System involved the construction of new roads that served as upgrades to the older two-lane highway system, and a similar modernization should take place for the rail network. ASCE supports the planning, development, operation, maintenance, and expansion of a national network of high-speed and intercity passenger rail systems. Investment in high-speed rail should be balanced between incremental improvements to existing passenger rail systems and the development of advanced high-speed ground transportation. Significant investment in high-speed passenger rail infrastructure would also benefit the economy, as freight rail operations would not encounter as much interference from passenger travel.

Passenger rail service extends beyond train stations and miles of track. Rail systems should be appropriately connected to other modes, including highways, mass transit, intercity bus service, and commercial air service. An important element of infrastructure to consider is transit, which often links travelers to longer-distance rail corridors. Safe and reliable first- and last-mile transit options are critical to ensure people have access to passenger rail services. Transit earned a D- on ASCE's *2021 Report Card for America's Infrastructure*, the lowest grade among all the infrastructure categories. ASCE recommends increased investment from state and local governments as well as the private sector to reduce the backlog of rehabilitation needs and increase transit mode share.

Conclusion

ASCE thanks the FRA for the opportunity to submit a comment regarding the recently established Interstate Rail Compacts Grant Program. ASCE's members include a range of professionals from the transportation sector, and we appreciate the opportunity to share our perspective. Rail is a vital part of the transportation network, and the compacts formed between state governments present a good opportunity to improve this infrastructure. ASCE stands ready to answer any questions and assist the agency as this important program gets underway.