

Agreements secure \$590 million in federal passenger rail funding for Washington state

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

Posted on : February 28, 2011 at 5:08 am

OLYMPIA — Agreements have been signed that guarantee Washington state will get \$590 million in federal stimulus money to improve the Amtrak Cascades rail corridor from Portland to Seattle, Gov. Chris Gregoire said today. One agreement was signed between the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) that commits FRA to allocate 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) money to Washington's passenger rail projects. The \$590 million initially was awarded in early 2010, and this new agreement guarantees the money. Separately, Amtrak, BNSF Railway and WSDOT signed an agreement that outlines how rail investments will be made based on service outcomes and passenger rail performance benchmarks on rail lines shared by freight and passenger rail, such as on-time performance, faster travel times and frequency of service.

As a result of the \$590 million in Recovery Act high-speed-rail funding: Two additional daily Amtrak Cascades round trips will be added between Seattle and Portland, for a total six, by 2017. On-time reliability is expected to increase from 62 to 88 percent. More consistent speeds will be possible throughout the corridor, resulting in faster travel times between Seattle and Portland. Major construction projects will be completed that will include building bypass tracks to allow for increased train frequency and multiple upgrades to existing track. Several safety-related projects will be completed, including grade separations and the latest technology in advanced-warning signal systems. This will reduce passenger/freight congestion, making passenger travel times shorter with more reliable on-time service. "This is another great development for our state in that this rail work will generate thousands of highly skilled construction and operating jobs and result in important improvements in rail passenger service," Gregoire said. "It's especially exciting following the Pentagon's selection of Boeing to build the next generation of Air Force tankers, which also will bring thousands of jobs to Washington," Gregoire said credit is due to the state's congressional delegation, including Sen. Patty Murray and Rep. Rick Larsen, who were instrumental in working with federal partners in Washington, D.C., to secure this passenger rail funding. "Signing this agreement now means work can begin during this year's construction season," said Washington Transportation Secretary Paula Hammond, noting that the ARRA funds will create more than 6,000 direct and indirect jobs in the Pacific Northwest. "Ultimately, the goal is to boost the rail-line capacity and relieve mainline congestion, allowing Amtrak Cascades to offer more frequent and reliable passenger rail service between Portland and Seattle." "This is an important milestone in our longstanding relationship with WSDOT to fund improvements for additional and improved passenger service in the Cascades corridor," said Matt Rose, BNSF Railway chairman and CEO. "We believe reaching this agreement is consistent with that long-term relationship with WSDOT and our agreement with Amtrak, which will bring improved passenger service in the corridor." Ridership continues to grow on Amtrak Cascades, with a 10 percent increase between 2009 and 2010. Since Amtrak Cascades service began in 1994, annual ridership has increased from 100,000 to 840,000 last year. "Amtrak is privileged to be a long-time partner with the state of Washington in

the development, growth and operation of its premier and popular passenger rail service," said Amtrak President and CEO Joe Boardman. "Amtrak congratulates all the parties in reaching this important agreement to advance America's high-speed rail program and we look forward to the opportunity to deliver improved intercity travel options for rail passengers in the Pacific Northwest." Hammond said passenger rail is a viable alternative available to travelers up and down the I-5 corridor — the reason Washington has invested more than \$331 million in passenger rail since 1994. Washington state received an additional \$161.5 million in high-speed rail funds redirected from Wisconsin and Ohio, which declined the ARRA money. Agreements to obligate this additional funding for Washington projects are expected in the near future. In addition, Gregoire has said stimulus funds rejected by Florida could be well spent in Washington. Florida's governor has indicated he will reject \$2.4 billion in high-speed-rail stimulus funding. Additional money, up to the Washington state's original application for \$1.3 billion in ARRA funds, could be used to achieve more round trips between Seattle and Portland.