

Southwest Chief in New Mexico – Timeline of Events Since 2010

2010

January – As BNSF has not operated freight trains between La Junta, CO and Lamy, NM since 2007, the railroad tells Amtrak that all maintenance costs for continued operation of the *Southwest Chief* between the two cities must be borne by Amtrak after December 31, 2015 if Amtrak wishes to continue operating service over the line. BNSF also states that it will no longer maintain the tracks between Hutchinson, KS, and La Junta, CO to 79 mph, reducing that portion of the tracks to 60 mph maximum.

2011

April – In a letter to state DOT officials in Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico, Ray Lang, Amtrak’s Senior Director for State Relations, proposes a five-way split to maintain the line: a ten-year commitment of \$4 million annually from each of the three states, Amtrak and BNSF.

2012

April – Officials of Amtrak and BNSF hold a meeting in Garden City, KS with representatives of the communities the *Chief* serves in Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico. Amtrak reinforces that financial support will be required for infrastructure upgrades and ongoing maintenance. An Amtrak press release states: “Amtrak and BNSF are committed to work with the affected communities to find a solution to the issue, with Amtrak and BNSF both saying the current route is the best for the *Southwest Chief*.”

2013

January – Amtrak hosts special train Garden City to La Junta for railroad, DOT and elected officials to inspect the line.

2014

January/February – During the 30-day New Mexico legislative session, on a strong bipartisan basis, funding legislation that started in the House moves to the Senate for final committee action. Although the legislation does not move out of committee before the end of the session, the Legislature authorizes (and Governor Martinez approves) funding for three studies through NMDOT: 1) A legal study to review the impact of the Anti-Donation clause in the New Mexico State Constitution; 2) an engineering cost estimate related to maintaining the line to passenger train speeds; and 3) and a review of the economic impact of the *Chief*. All three studies are expected to be released in early November.

March – Amtrak Exhibit Train – which includes memorabilia as well as information about important developments across the Amtrak system – visits Santa Fe.

Spring – Eleven communities in southern Colorado and Kansas commit \$9.3 million in matching funds to secure a \$12.5 million US DOT Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant for up to 80 miles of improvements to the route in Kansas and Colorado.

April – US Senators Mark Udall (CO), Tom Udall (NM) and Martin Heinrich (NM) issue a joint letter to Patty Murray (WA) and Susan Collins (ME), Chairman and Ranking Member (respectively) of the Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development “requesting support for the capital investment needs of Amtrak’s long distance trains.” The letter highlights the *Southwest Chief*: “Amtrak has announced a possible re-route of the *Southwest Chief* . . . the potential re-route has raised serious concerns among the affected communities.”

May – Citizens in Raton, Las Vegas, Lamy and Albuquerque turn out to support the *Chief* on Amtrak’s “National Train Day.” Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper signs legislation which creates and funds a seven-member commission to manage efforts to save the train in Colorado; to cooperate with Kansas, New Mexico, Amtrak and BNSF Railway on a combined effort; and to work to add Pueblo as a new stop on the route.

July – **Amtrak President Joe Boardman** visits communities along the route of the *Chief* in Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico on a special train to meet with citizens, elected officials, transportation officials and leaders and scout-members at the Philmont Scout Ranch. Boardman emphasizes the need to find infrastructure funding to retain the train on its current route. **Senator Martin Heinrich (D-NM), BNSF Chairman Matt Rose and NMDOT Secretary Tom Church** join Boardman for segments of the trip. *Southwest Chief* supporters meet the train at all stops. Following the visit, the *Santa Fe New Mexican* publishes an editorial on July 19, emphasizing that “without upgrades, the tracks can’t handle passenger trains, leaving Amtrak with little choice but to abandon the route . . . that decision would cost Northern New Mexico passenger rail, leaving people with fewer transportation choices and pulverizing an already fragile economy.”

August – Three important resolutions supporting the *Chief* are passed by key New Mexico organizations: The **New Mexico Association of Counties** (the original resolution was passed in June and affirmed by the Association’s Board of Directors in August, making the resolution a top priority in the 2015 legislative process); the **New Mexico Municipal League**; and the **Santa Fe Metropolitan Planning Organization**. These resolutions will have a strong influence on the 2015 New Mexico legislative session.

September – USDOT awards \$12.5 million in TIGER grants to Kansas and Colorado for infrastructure work on the route; according to Amtrak spokesperson Marc Magliari “New Mexico still remains a question mark” . . . while the grant is a “huge development”. . . “questions about track and signal conditions from Trinidad, Colorado . . . and through New Mexico remain unresolved.” (1)

September – The **New Mexico State Transportation Commission (STC)** – which sets directions and priorities for the NMDOT -- meets in Raton and the *Chief* is discussed in detail. The Commission chair – Pete Rahn – “thanked everyone present who spoke in support of the *Southwest Chief*. He provided his assurance that some type of statement of support would be forthcoming and further indicated that the STC fully understands that this issue is important to the affected communities. He also stated the STC hopes that some sort of resolution can be found.” (2) Rahn also directs the NMDOT Secretary to meet with Amtrak, BNSF and the other affected DOT Secretaries “to find a solution to this problem.”

November – The NMDOT releases the study “Analysis of Amtrak Southwest Chief Maintenance Costs and Economic Impacts” funded by the 2014 legislature and approved by Governor Martinez at a meeting of the New Mexico State Legislature Interim Transportation Infrastructure Revenue Subcommittee. At the same meeting, NMDOT attorney Arthur J. Waskey, Contract Staff Attorney, Legislative Council Service that the anti-donation clause in the New Mexico Constitution does not preclude the State from financially supporting the *Chief*.

1) “Southwest Chief gets reprieve in Colorado, Kansas,” *Santa Fe New Mexican* by Patrick Malone, September 9, 2014.
2) New Mexico State Transportation Commission Meeting minutes for September 18, 2014. Meeting held in Raton, NM.