

A passenger train from Greenville to Charleston?



Riders board an Amtrak train at the Greenville Amtrak Station earlier this week. Some rail advocates are seeking the introduction of a new Greenville-to-Charleston passenger line. MYKAL MCELLOWNEY/STAFF

Upstate group pushes plan to connect SC cities via rail lines

Q: Is there any talk of using the inland port to run passenger trains from the Upstate to Charleston?

A rail map of South Carolina shows the state criss-crossed in nearly every direction by active railroad lines — some short, some long, some within the state, some leaving it. But only three carry people rather than freight.

All three of those passenger routes traverse South Carolina in a general north-south orientation, passing through the Palmetto State's major cities — Greenville, Columbia, Charleston — but not connecting any of them with the others.

Some are hoping to change that. The 2013 introduction of the inland port in Greer has sparked conversations among railroad advocates about the possibility of using the active Upstate-to-Charleston corridor to introduce passenger service from the mountains to coast.

It's a conversation that involves lots and lots of money that the state isn't in a hurry to spend. But similar projects have been accomplished elsewhere, and a new federal push to ramp up rail service in the Southeast will highlight how trains can play an important role in expanding transportation options in South Carolina.

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Q&Amy

Rail

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You can't get there from here

Taking a train from Greenville to Charleston is not for the faint of heart. The shortest option is a 20-hour journey that begins at 11 p.m. and ends after 7 p.m. the following day after transfers in Charlotte and Wilson, North Carolina. It's a \$130 ticket for a seat (not a bed), according to the Amtrak ticketing website.

By contrast, a Greyhound bus will run you \$22 with two days' advance planning and take 5 ½ hours.

A Spartanburg-based group, founded in 2014, has begun advocating for an east-west passenger train line, with departures from Greenville and Charleston around 6 or 7 a.m. and 4 or 5 p.m. daily.

"You'd have two trains down, two trains up," said Frank Ezell, founder of the South Carolina Passenger Rail Consortium. "We believe we can fill the coaches with vacationers and business travelers."

"It's going to take money — a lot of money, as a matter of fact. But it's something that needs to be done."

FRANK EZELL
SCPRC FOUNDER

The proposed route would include stops in Greer, Spartanburg, Union/Pacolet, Columbia, Orangeburg, Summerville and North Charleston. The plan, outlined in a position paper that has been presented to the state Department of Transportation, calls for using the existing Norfolk Southern rail line connecting the inland port with the port of Charleston.

"It's going to take money — a lot of money, as a matter of fact. But it's something that needs to be done," said Ezell, whose group includes business leaders, an Amtrak representative and transportation officials.

South Carolina's Statewide Rail Plan, published in August 2014, highlights current limitations to passenger rail service in the state, including early morning and late night schedules inconvenient for many riders (trains arrive in Greenville at 5 a.m. and 11 p.m., for instance) and poor on-time performance.

Despite that, Amtrak ridership has been on a near-steady uptick since 2004, reaching more than 240,000 boardings and alightings in 2012, the most recent data reported in the plan. That's among the three highest years since 1989.

Expanding service would require a joint effort among Amtrak, freight line operators, and state and local governments. It's complex but not impossible, as the city of Roanoke, Virginia, has recently proven.

That city, founded essentially as a railroad stop in the 19th century, will reintroduce passenger train service in 2017 after a \$90 million project to extend the line along an existing freight corridor. The city has not had active passenger service since the 1980s, said city manager Chris Morrill.

The service will connect the mountainous city near the state's western border with Lynchburg, 50 miles away, from which passengers can travel to Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia and other points north.

"Like Greenville, we're building more of a tourism destination," Morrill said. "Folks from D.C. can hop on the train on Friday with their bikes and get right off in downtown Roanoke."

For business or leisure travelers, it'll be about a four-hour ride to Washington, about the same as by car but with on-board Wi-Fi service and without traffic delays.

The project requires extensive upgrades to existing

freight railroad lines and the installation in some places of new track, as well as the construction of a passenger platform and other infrastructure improvements.

"Coal doesn't complain when it gets jostled around," Morrill said.

A representative for Norfolk Southern said upgrading freight lines to carry higher-speed passenger trains is a costly process that typically requires the involvement of state governments.

The Roanoke project is being funded almost entirely by the state of Virginia, which made expanding rail service a legislative priority in 2009.

Riding the legislative rails

A recent announcement from Anthony Foxx, U.S. Secretary of Transportation, to allocate \$1 million to study passenger rail options in the Southeast is shedding new light on trains.

Similar to a project recently completed in the Southwest, the study will coordinate multiple state agencies to evaluate how best to expand rail service throughout the region.

"We now need to focus our attention with the U.S. Department of Transportation to ensure our rail plan is included in the Southeast rail plan," Ezell said.

Foxx's announcement focused on rail connections between major metropolitan areas, but officials said the study is not limited to a long-sought high-speed corridor between Florida and Washington, D.C. That project is already in various phases of study across four states.

"There's no doubt it (the study) will extend beyond that single corridor," said Mike Booth, public affairs specialist with the Federal Railroad Administration. "If it's something that's of concern to South Carolina, it's probably going to end up in the plan. ... Everything's on the table at this point."

The Statewide Rail Plan will help guide South Carolina's contribution to the federal study, said Doug Frate, director of intermodal and freight operations for the state Department of Transportation.

The plan makes only fleeting mention of intercity rail projects, but the possibilities include the Upstate-to-Charleston route. (Others outlined were Columbia to Charlotte and Florence to Raleigh.)

"I do definitely feel that corridor will be one that we'll want to look at it and see does it make sense to take a much closer look at it," Frate said.

A feasibility study is the first required step, but SCDOT has held off on planning it in anticipation of the recent federal announcement.

No estimates about the potential cost of the project, which would span about 200 miles, were available.

South Carolina currently provides no funding for rail projects.

"The nature of the congestion levels that you may have in certain areas of Virginia and North Carolina, as well as the population and population densities in some of the urban centers, lends itself to being a little further along with respect to mobility choices and rail, but we're well on our way here in South Carolina," Frate said.

Trains can alleviate current and projected congestion on interstates and highways and can contribute to economic development growth.

"The value is always in providing mobility choices, both for South Carolina citizens as well as for tourists and visitors to the state," Frate added.

Details on when and how the federal study will be executed are in the planning stages, Booth said.

A representative for Amtrak said there are no current plans to expand service in the state.

Got a question? Send it to Q&Amy by emailing me at aburns@greenvillenews.com or calling 864-298-3822.