



2022 Amtrak Cascades Service Development Plan Progress Report

Introduction

This report is submitted in compliance with ESSB 5689, Section 223 (2), which requires that a “status report must be provided to the transportation committees of the Legislature by June 30, 2022” related to the service development plan for the state-sponsored Amtrak Cascades intercity passenger rail system.

WSDOT is engaged in planning the next phase of capital improvements related to Amtrak Cascades intercity passenger rail service through western Washington. Much has changed on the Amtrak Cascades corridor since the last long-range plan was created in 2006. A refreshed plan that accounts for today’s realities is needed to guide practical future improvements.

WSDOT started the process of developing a new plan in 2018, when the agency applied for a federal Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant to complete a Service Development Plan (SDP) for Amtrak Cascades. The SDP is at the core of the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) requirements for improving and expanding passenger rail service on the corridor. In 2022, creation of an SDP was codified by Congress as a requirement for FRA’s Corridor Identification and Development Program in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) awarded the grant to WSDOT in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic arrived as WSDOT was working with FRA to negotiate the scope of the work funded by the grant. Acknowledging the pandemic’s widespread effects that reach beyond transportation to include many other factors, the first phase of an Amtrak Cascades SDP is now underway. This phase will produce a Preliminary SDP, a summary of possible alternatives to improve the Amtrak Cascades service over the next 20 years and create a blueprint for future capital improvements and service changes.

Grant agreement development

WSDOT began meeting with FRA in early 2019 to develop the grant agreement for this work. Rather than develop a full SDP, FRA asked WSDOT to focus on pre-NEPA development of alternatives. A full SDP will not be produced until after a preferred alternative is identified.

WSDOT and FRA immediately began negotiating the new scope of work to define objectives and methods that could be accomplished within the grant budget. The start of the pandemic in 2020 raised questions about the validity of travel demand assumptions used in ridership forecasting, resulting in additional changes to the scope of work. WSDOT and FRA continued to negotiate scope revisions until the grant agreement was completed on September 23, 2021.

Project Scope

In partnership with FRA and BNSF Railway (BNSF), WSDOT is starting the SDP development process with a Preliminary SDP document that addresses the uncertainty around future travel trends created by the COVID-19 pandemic while developing a set of alternatives to carry forward into future planning work. The pandemic has changed the way people travel, including changes to workforce and housing norms. It is critical to have a solid understanding of the pandemic's impacts that will provide the foundation for future Amtrak Cascades service. The Preliminary SDP is focused on the portion of the current Amtrak Cascades route through western Washington between Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, British Columbia.

The Preliminary SDP includes the following tasks:

- Intercity passenger travel demand research to identify travel trends likely to affect ridership and develop future scenarios that reflect these trends
- Preliminary Purpose and Need development to explain the goals of the project and the needs it is intended to address
- Service option development to define options for changing Amtrak Cascades to address future travel trends and analyze how the current route would need to be modified to accommodate them
- Alternative development to determine which service options should be the focus of further SDP analysis, through a screening process using ridership forecasts for the service options under the different scenarios that were developed. Further ridership analysis that meets FRA requirements would be needed at that time.

There are several deliverables that require FRA approval before WSDOT can start subsequent tasks.

The two primary end products of the Preliminary SDP will be:

- A Preliminary Purpose and Need statement to guide decision-making as planning work continues
- A range of alternatives that will be the focus of further SDP analysis

Work accomplished to date

Consultant selection and scope of work: WSDOT invited consulting firms on the roster of prequalified consultants to submit a proposal on September 14, 2021. After reviewing the responses, WSDOT selected AECOM to work on the project on October 25, 2021. An agreement with AECOM was executed by WSDOT on March 17, 2022.

BNSF agreement: WSDOT entered into an agreement with the host railroad BNSF Railway to undertake the operations analysis to determine the infrastructure needs for the corridor under each of the identified service options. This is an expansion of the work BNSF recently undertook to support Sounder South planning for Sound Transit. Having BNSF expand this work is cost efficient and provides consistency between the separate planning efforts. As the host railroad for

almost all the corridor north of Portland, having BNSF integrally involved in early planning will ensure that the work meets BNSF requirements and provides a solid base for future work.

Project Management Plan: The draft Project Management Plan (including a detailed schedule for the work) was submitted to FRA for review on April 21, 2022. Final approval is pending and expected by the end of June 2022. Approval of this document is a prerequisite to starting the grant-funded work.

Stakeholder Coordination Plan: WSDOT is responsible for developing this document. The draft document was submitted to FRA for preliminary review on March 22, 2022 and will be submitted for approval by FRA after the Project Management Plan is approved.

Project web page: [A web page for the project](#) was developed and published on the WSDOT website on April 29, 2022. Information will continue to be added as the project progresses.

Future work

During the summer of 2022, WSDOT plans to begin formal stakeholder outreach, while also working on the travel demand research and developing a Preliminary Purpose and Need statement for the project. Development of the Preliminary Purpose and Need will include a wide-range of public involvement efforts.

In the fall, WSDOT will define a range of scenarios based on the travel demand research that will be used in ridership forecasting work. Up to five service options will be defined for future development of Amtrak Cascades.

Late this year and into the beginning of 2023, WSDOT will be working with BNSF and its consultant to analyze how the service options would affect rail operations in the corridor. The analysis will result in a list of operational changes and the conceptual infrastructure needs required to support the service options.

During the spring and summer of 2023, WSDOT will be developing ridership forecasts for each service option under each of the future scenarios defined.

To complete this phase of work, WSDOT will review the results of the ridership forecasts and operations analysis to define the alternatives to be studied when planning continues. The alternatives, and the planning processes that were undertaken to develop them, will be documented in a final report in the fall of 2023, thus completing the work funded by the FRA grant.