

AMTRAK - the Better Alternative

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The Baltimore-Washington Rapid Rail (BWRR) (the project developer) and the Northeast MagLev (TNEM) (the promotional entity) have the short-term goal of obtaining Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) approval to build a magnetic levitation (maglev) train between Baltimore and Washington, DC, with the long-term goal of extending the train operation to New York City by way of Philadelphia. Japan's Superconducting Magnetic Levitation (SCMagLev) train is the high-speed, ground-based transportation system TNEM is promoting to build in the northeast corridor of the United States.

Information about the SCMagLev and BWRR's plans to build and operate the system have raised many questions and concerns. This is one of a series of articles that identifies and discusses some of the many questions and concerns citizens and communities have identified with moving forward in building and operating the SCMagLev.

Abstract

The existing Amtrak train system, with its ongoing work to improve and enhance services and ridership experience, provides demonstrable evidence that supports the argument for its continued development. It is a far better and more cost-effective solution to address the rail transportation needs of the Northeast Corridor than the construction of the SCMagLev train system - an expensive, elite, and commercially unproven technology system that presents many unanswered safety and financial questions, as well as harmful community and environmental issues.

About Amtrak

Amtrak currently provides intercity passenger rail service with over 21,000 route-miles of track across 46 states, including the District of Columbia, and Canada. Amtrak's *Acela Express*, *Northeast Regional*, *State Supported*, and *Long-Distance* rail services between Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, provide an expansive array of services for passengers and commuters. As the majority owner of the Northeast Corridor (NEC), Amtrak provides coordinated passenger and freight rail service planning for the NEC, as well as infrastructure access and operational support to eight commuter rail authorities — including the Maryland Area Regional Commuter (MARC) and the Virginia Railway Express (VRE) — and four freight rail operators. Amtrak's long experience as the U.S. high-speed operator, and the NEC end-to-end user, provides a unique, profound, and expert insight and perspective about the Baltimore-Washington passenger rail transportation network.

Questions & Concerns

- (1) Amtrak and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) have already analyzed the passenger rail transportation needs between Baltimore and Washington, DC, and found a new train route was not necessary.
 - Amtrak's *NEC Future* program has already addressed the mobility challenges of the Baltimore-Washington, DC, travel corridor with a focus on the role of passenger rail in meeting current and future

challenges.¹ The FRA has already completed a lengthy and costly evaluation of future transportation needs and considered the capacity constraints of the total transportation system — including rail, highway, and air — to complete a programmatic Environmental Impact Study (EIS) of the *NEC Future* proposals and plans, and Amtrak received FRA’s approval. The EIS focused on technology-neutral rail passenger technologies. Although a new alignment (route) was considered, the option of building one was ruled out as being unduly expensive and unnecessary. Instead, the preferred alternative focused on improving the existing rail alignment (route).

(2) The framework for passenger rail investment between Baltimore and Washington, DC, is already in place.

- Amtrak, the owner of the NEC between Baltimore and Washington, DC, works collaboratively with the FRA, MARC, and VRE, as well as the Northeast Corridor Commission, the states of Maryland and Virginia, Washington, DC, the Maryland Transportation Authority (MTA), the District of Columbia Department of Transportation (DCDOT), the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), and others, to develop the *NEC Future* to address current and future needs, solve problems, prepare plans, and invest in passenger rail between Baltimore and Washington, DC.

(3) The ability to evaluate the environmental consequences of building and operating the SCMagLev is unclear.

- The SCMagLev technology proposed by BWRR is not a proven rail technology nor has it been commercially successful. Data and experience are not yet available to evaluate the potential effects of building and operating the SCMagLev train system on the local and regional economies, existing transportation systems, and the human and natural environment, as required in a Draft Environmental Impact Study (DEIS) and EIS.
- Additionally, BWRR has clearly indicated this is only the first segment of an SCMagLev line they propose to extend from Baltimore to Boston and Massachusetts to the north, and from Washington, DC, to Charlotte, North Carolina, to the south. This indicates that the current SCMagLev scope provides neither true independent utility nor the full scope of the project as required for a DEIS and EIS.

(4) Substantial investment in passenger rail transportation is already underway between Baltimore and Washington, DC.

- Amtrak, Citizens Against the SCMagLev (CATS), the Maryland Coalition for Responsible Transit (MCRT), and a growing number of community organizations, environmental groups, and elected officials at the county, state, and federal levels, question the competing priorities between the Baltimore-Washington SCMagLev project and Amtrak’s ongoing upgrades and enhancements.
- The SCMagLev calls for construction of a separate maglev network with new guideways, stations, and maintenance facilities. To fund this massive construction, BWRR is anticipating funding from a mix of federal and private sectors.
- Amtrak’s *NEC Future*’s EIS to renew and modernize the NEC infrastructure between Washington, DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City, and Boston was approved by the FRA. The new \$4.7 million

¹ U.S. Department of Transportation and Federal Railroad Administration. *NEC Future: A Rail Invest Plan for the Northeast Corridor. Record of Decision*. July 2017. <https://www.fra.dot.gov/necfuture/pdfs/rod/rod.pdf>. Referred to throughout this white paper.

recently-renovated Baltimore-Washington Airport rail station used by both Amtrak and MARC is an example of this renewal in progress (see photos).^{2,3}



Original BWI Rail Station. Photo by Bob E.



New BWI Rail Station. Photo by B. Taylor

- *NEC Future* has confirmed the need for passenger rail investment on the existing corridor between Baltimore and Washington, DC, including the replacement of the Baltimore and Potomac Tunnels, additional right-of-way and track segments, and modernization and expansion of the Washington Union Station. These and other crucial NEC projects are already well along in the planning process, most having completed the engineering and environmental clearance stages. Several of the upgrade projects have been completed. Over the next 5-10 years, the cost to complete them will require substantial financial commitment from the federal government, Amtrak, and others. These commitments are in direct competition with the plans of BWRR and their proposed SCMagLev train system. BWRR's anticipated January 2021 DEIS must justify the need for the SCMagLev as compared with Amtrak services, acknowledging that Amtrak is already providing passenger and commuter transportation and improving their array of services and NEC systems.
- BWRR has openly and repeatedly stated and testified that further public investment has already been committed and they will pursue their efforts to secure additional public, including tax dollar, investments. However, as noted previously, major public passenger rail transportation support (tax dollars) has already been committed to Amtrak and the associated improvements and construction is underway. Public-private investment in projects noted in the *NEC Future* are also underway. To date, Amtrak has secured a \$2.5 billion loan with the FRA to purchase new high-speed trains and construct the infrastructure needed to optimize high-speed rail service between Baltimore and Washington, DC.⁴

Findings/Conclusion

- (1) Amtrak does not operate independently. It continues to work collaboratively with the FRA, NEC, MTA, MARC, VRE, DCDOT, and WMATA, as well as the states of Maryland and Virginia, Washington, DC, and others. They have jointly developed the *NEC Future*, prepared the approved Passenger Rail Corridor Investment Plan—which includes enhancement projects through 2040 and beyond—and have started

² E., Bob. Photo of original BWI Rail Station. May 29, 2016. foursquare.com/v/bwi-amtrakmarc-rail-station-bwi/4ac9c22bf964a5201ec020e3/photos.

³ Taylor, Barbara H. Photos of newly renovated BWI Rail Station and rededication. *The Baltimore Sun*. December 10, 2019. www.baltimoresun.com/travel/bs-md-new-train-station-20191210-u3tc4uizfbc2zn3djp7c2rxije-photogallery.html.

⁴ Clabaugh, Jeff. Amtrak's new Acela fleet is on the move (see it). January 23, 2020. <https://wtop.com/business-finance/2020/01/amtraks-new-acela-fleet-is-on-the-move-see-it/>.

implementing the planned improvements and enhancements to the Northeast Corridor rail system and service.

- (2) CATS, MCRT, and Amtrak (which has a history of successful EIS preparation and approval), cannot determine the environmental impact of the SCMagLev train project because: "Data and experience are not yet available to evaluate the potential effects of maglev on the economy, transportation system, and the human and natural environment as is required in a DEIS and EIS."
- (3) Amtrak's *NEC Future* has moved past the planning process, including successfully completing the environmental clearance and initial engineering stages, to beginning the actual upgrades and building phase. Financial commitments include a \$2.5 billion loan to purchase high-speed trains and construct the infrastructure needed to improve high-speed train travel along the Northeast Corridor.
- (4) Amtrak's *NEC Future*-related EIS was the result of a costly four-year study, to which the regional, state, and federal stakeholders have concurred and approved Amtrak's recommendations and financial plans to proceed with the enhancement of existing right-of-way, equipment, and facilities.

Continued development and support of Amtrak is a far better solution than moving forward with building the SCMagLev transportation system. Amtrak and its options provide a reliable, technically and financially-proven system at a reasonable cost for near- and long-distance rail transportation that accommodates commuters and passengers. After four years of study by the FRA, which involved the significant use of financial and human resources, and extensive engagement with stakeholders — the federal government, states, cities, the railroads, and the public — the already-completed, approved, and published *NEC Future* lays out a sound plan and investment approach to address the NEC's current and future needs. This approved plan should remain the blueprint for the future of passenger rail transportation between Baltimore and Washington, DC, as well as for the Northeast Corridor.

The competitive SCMagLev transportation system, by comparison, is inordinately expensive, commercially unproven, and potentially damaging to people, communities, and the environment. There are many unanswered safety issues, and it is very likely large government subsidies (tax dollars) will be required to build and maintain and operate the SCMagLev. SCMagLev, a transportation system for the elite and well-heeled traveler, is not justified and should not be approved.

Want to Help?

- (1) Share this information with your family, friends, neighbors, and community.
- (2) Join our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/groups/CitizensAgainstSCMaglev.
- (3) Contact your elected officials to express your opposition to building the SCMagLev, go to: myreps.datamade.us.
- (4) Submit multiple public comments often at www.bwmaglev.info/index.php/contact-us. State your objection(s), and always end by saying you support the "No Build Alternative."
- (4) Learn more about the concerns and impacts the SCMagLev will have on our communities, see: www.stophistrain.org/.
- (5) Make a contribution to support Citizens Against the SCMagLev (CATS) and Maryland Coalition for Responsible Transit (MCRT) at mcrt-action.org. Your donation, in any amount, is appreciated. Thanks for your support!

About the Author

Daniel E. Woomer is a community activist and technical expert. He retired after a long career that included positions with Westinghouse Defense Center, Johns Hopkins University's Applied Physics Laboratory, and the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). During his career with the DOE, he worked in various positions with the

Energy Information Administration and the Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Affairs, and he helped set up the Office of Technology Transitions. He also served for several years as an adjunct faculty member with the University of Maryland University College, where he developed and taught mathematics, supervisory and leadership classes.

Sources:

- (1) Campbell-Lorenc, AICP, Janet. Letter to Mr. Bradley M. Smith, Director of the Office of Freight and Multi-modalism, Maryland Department of Transportation. Amtrak, Corporate Planning. January 31, 2017.
- (2) Woomer, Dan. "SCMagLev - AMTRAK Comment Submission to the Baltimore-Washington Rapid Rail Environmental Impact Study." January 5, 2018
- (3) Wikipedia. "BWI Rail Station." en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BWI_Rail_Station.

Citizens Against the SCMagLev (CATS) is a confederation of scientists, engineers, experts, community organizations and citizens in support of transportation infrastructure improvements that benefit our communities, state, and nation. CATS opposes the construction of an expensive transportation system serving a small minority of the wealthy at the cost of taxpayer funds far better used to maintain and improve the transportation infrastructure needed and used daily by all citizens, businesses, and commerce. For up-to-date information on the SCMagLev opposition, see our Facebook page at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/CitizensAgainstSCMaglev>.