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Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-470](#), a report to the Chairman, Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs

Why GAO Did This Study

Commuter rail agencies provide mobility to millions of people across the country, often using Amtrak infrastructure and services. Given these interactions, an abrupt Amtrak cessation could have a significant impact on commuter rail operations. Amtrak's chronic financial problems and recent budget proposals make such a cessation a possibility. GAO was asked to examine (1) the extent to which commuter rail agencies rely on Amtrak for access to infrastructure and services, (2) issues that commuter rail agencies would face if Amtrak abruptly ceased to provide them with services and infrastructure access, and (3) the options available to commuter rail agencies should Amtrak abruptly cease to provide them services and infrastructure access.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Department of Transportation (DOT) further refine cost estimates of commuter rail directed-service scenarios. GAO also recommends that Amtrak improve its accounting practices as well as its financial reports. DOT generally agreed with the report's findings and the intention of the recommendation, but expressed concern about refining the cost estimate at this time because of data and resource limitations. Amtrak generally agreed with the report's findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-470.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact JayEtta Z. Hecker at (202) 512-2834 or heckerj@gao.gov.

COMMUTER RAIL

Commuter Rail Issues Should Be Considered in Debate over Amtrak

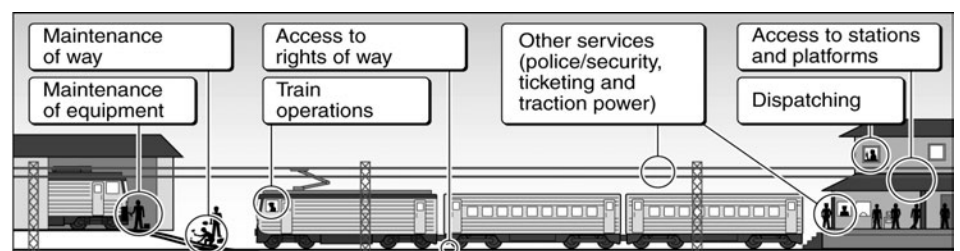
What GAO Found

Most commuter rail agencies rely on the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) for some level of access to infrastructure and services, particularly those that operate over Amtrak-owned portions of the Northeast Corridor (NEC). This reliance includes the use of key stations, access to the NEC, and equipment maintenance services (see figure below). Commuter rail agencies typically pay Amtrak for access to infrastructure and services, although their financial relationships with Amtrak vary and often lack clarity. Several issues contribute to the lack of clarity, including limitations in Amtrak's accounting practices, the lack of transparency in Amtrak's financial reports, and the structure of the financial arrangements between Amtrak and commuter rail agencies. This makes it difficult to fully understand the financial relationship between these agencies and Amtrak and whether they are contributing their fair share for improvements and maintenance of Amtrak's infrastructure. Also, this lack of clarity hinders Amtrak management's ability to make fully informed decisions about its commuter rail line-of-business.

An abrupt Amtrak cessation would raise two critical operational issues for commuter rail agencies that rely on Amtrak. Specifically, agencies would face the potential loss of skilled Amtrak labor and access to Amtrak-owned infrastructure, which could make it difficult for some to avoid severe service disruptions. For example, agencies both on and off the NEC could not continue to fully operate their services without continued access to Amtrak-owned track and other facilities.

Most commuter rail agencies that rely on Amtrak have identified ways to mitigate service disruptions in an abrupt Amtrak cessation. However, these options are largely dependent on retaining Amtrak employees and access to Amtrak's infrastructure. Federal agencies could provide short-term options to mitigate potential impacts on commuter rail agencies through their authority to order continued commuter service (called "directed service"), although federal officials stated that service disruptions are likely and the cost estimates are unreliable. Private transportation companies could provide options for commuter rail agencies in the long term; however, other issues would need to be addressed to ensure a smooth transition.

Types of Services and Infrastructure Access Provided by Amtrak to Commuter Rail Agencies



Source: GAO.