

Questions for the Record to the Honorable Sarah Feinberg
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee
Full Committee Nominations Hearing
August 6, 2020

Written Questions Submitted by the Hon. Maria Cantwell to Hon. Sarah Feinberg.

Amtrak Safety Culture. As discussed at the hearing, Amtrak has faced a number of serious safety challenges in recent years, including the derailment in DuPont, Washington in December 2017. To ensure that Amtrak continues to develop a more serious and predictable safety culture, I would like answers to the following questions.

Question 1. What specific steps will you take at Amtrak to prevent another crash like the one that occurred in DuPont, Washington?

Answer: If the Senate confirms my nomination, upon rejoining the Amtrak board one of my top priorities will be to receive a thorough briefing on safety issues and challenges across the entire company – from culture, to the implementation and installation of PTC, to coordination with the freight railroads, to safety culture and morale in the workforce.

I will also reach out to the current Federal Railroad Administrator and his team, and ask for a briefing on any current concerns they have about Amtrak’s safety culture.

I will also plan to stay in close contact with Amtrak’s Chief Safety Officer, and IG, in order to stay abreast of any developing issues.

I also find off-the-cuff and unannounced/unplanned engagement with employees is beneficial and assists whistleblowers and others in coming forward.

Question 2. What actions or assistance from Congress or other entities is necessary to prevent another crash like the one that occurred in DuPont, Washington from occurring in the future?

Answer. I believe the most important thing the Congress can do to ensure safety is to continue to put pressure on all railroads – passenger and freight – to meet important safety deadlines including the deadline for installation of PTC. It is also critically important for the Congress to send a clear message to the safety regulator, in this case the Federal Railroad Administration, that the finalization of safety sensitive rules and regulations should be prioritized.

Question 3. What do you view as the most important elements of a robust and committed safety culture?

Answer. Foremost, for employees at every level of the organization to feel not just comfortable, but also to feel a sense of responsibility, to speak up to supervisors, management and to fellow workers when an unsafe practice is witnessed – and for those employees to be treated with appreciation and respect, not derision, for speaking up.

Question 4. What specific steps will you take to ensure that those important elements are present within the Amtrak organization, and that safety culture remains a top priority for Amtrak during your tenure?

Answer: Again, frequent meetings and conversations with the Chief Safety Officer, the COO, employees up and down the organization, the IG, and the regulator. I would also be open to and interested in hearing from the Senate and House committees of jurisdiction about any concerns they may have.

Written Questions Submitted by the Hon. Amy Klobuchar to the Hon. Sarah Feinberg.

The Empire Builder, one of Amtrak's longest rail lines, provides a critical link for many rural communities in Minnesota. While long-distance passenger service generates about \$327 million in economic impact each year, the Administration has previously called for reducing federal funding for Amtrak's long-distance train services.

Question 1. If confirmed, will you commit to protecting funding for Amtrak's long-distance services like the Empire Builder?

Answer: Yes. Providing reliable long-distance service is core to Amtrak's purpose, an important line of service to maintain and improve upon, and it is an important driver of economic activity throughout rural America.

Written Questions Submitted by the Hon. Gary Peters to Ms. Sarah Feinberg.

Question 1. The top priority for Amtrak must be safety. Can you talk about your vision for Amtrak to emerge from the pandemic from a safety perspective as well as the importance of positive train control implementation?

Answer:

While safety has always, and must always, be a railroad's top priority, safety in the age of COVID is even more complicated. Amtrak must remain vigilant about maintaining best practices – on disinfecting and cleaning, on mask usage, and with social distancing and employee protection.

The installation of PTC is of critical safety importance – I am pleased that Amtrak has consistently led the country – both passenger and freight – in installation, testing, and implementation of this important technology. For some pieces of its network, Amtrak remains dependent on other railroads installing PTC in order for the railroad to be fully protected – it is important for those railroads to comply with the looming PTC deadline.

Question 2. One of the major challenges to Amtrak is on-time performance (“OTP”). The FRA issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking in March that included updates to OTP schedules. Do you have thoughts on the NPRM or solutions for OTP schedules?

Answer. You are absolutely correct, Senator. On-time performance is a significant challenge. I understand Amtrak has been working closely in this process with FRA and others. While I have not been briefed on its progress, I will certainly ask for one of my early briefings to include the status of this discussion. I know it is existential to Amtrak's ability to function as America's Railroad and deliver trains and customers on time to their desired destination. In order for them to be successful, there needs to be an agreed upon and enforceable framework consistent with congressional intent. I will assist in ensuring this process will yield such a result.

Question 3. Michigan has one of the highest percentages of state-supported rail lines in the country. Can you share your thoughts on the prospects of improving and expanding service in states like Michigan that have significant state supported rail lines?

Answer. Corridor service is the future of Amtrak's growth potential in intercity passenger rail, and Michigan is a good example of where corridor service works well. I am aware that there are good options for expansion in Michigan, and I would support further pursuing these efforts. My assumption is that the financial impacts of the pandemic will inevitably delay some plans for future growth, but intercity passenger rail is well positioned to play a larger role in connecting underserved communities across the nation in the future. Further, it is my understanding that most of the railroad tracks on the Chicago-Detroit corridor between Indiana and Detroit are owned by Amtrak and the State of Michigan. As a result,

Amtrak is in a better position to expand service in Michigan than in other regions of the country.

I look forward to working with you and your colleagues on how to best position Amtrak for future growth here and elsewhere.