

Testimony of Mr. Joel Szabat
Nominee to the Amtrak Board of Directors
United States Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee
Hearing on Nominations, June 21, 2023

Chair Cantwell, Ranking Member Cruz, distinguished Senators;

Thank you for considering my nomination to the Board of Directors of the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak).

This Committee has vetted me twice before. You generously forwarded my nominations to the floor, without dissent, as Assistant Secretary for Aviation and International Affairs in 2018 and as Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy in 2020. I now count 38 years of military, U.S. Department of Transportation, and other public service. I hope my performance as Assistant Secretary; my experience as Acting Under Secretary representing Secretary Elaine L. Chao on the Amtrak Board from June, 2019 through January, 2021; and my background in transportation, particularly rail transportation, will earn your approval again.

I have extensive experience overseeing rail capital projects. Starting in 2009, I was the designated federal official responsible for implementing the first three years of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA). We eventually built over 15,000 transportation projects nationwide, including signature rail projects such as Moynihan Station. Prior to that, I served during 2005 as the Transportation Counselor in the US Embassy in Baghdad, responsible for directing US government efforts to rebuild the Iraq Republic Railroad.

Before joining the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), I saw passenger rail from the state government perspective. From 1994 to 2001, I was a principal transportation consultant in the California State Legislature, and reviewed all proposed legislation affecting passenger rail and the state's cooperation with Amtrak.

I have also had private sector experience with freight railroads. I interned in the strategic planning office of one Class I railroad while in business school and consulted for another following graduation. Many of my other transportation roles have involved extensive cooperation with freight railroads. For example, while serving as Executive Director of the Maritime Administration from 2012 to 2018, I worked extensively with the Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command on rail-to-dock movement of military assets.

The Committee knows my familiarity with the transportation needs of rural America. At DOT, I managed the Essential Air Service (EAS) program, supporting over 170 small, rural communities, many of which are also served by Amtrak long distance routes. Traveling the country to meet mayors and airport officials in their communities, I learned to appreciate how vital intercity public transportation is to their mobility and economic development. If confirmed, I am committed to maintain and enhance Amtrak as a *nationwide* rail passenger corporation.

If confirmed to the Amtrak Board, my first priority would be the safety and security of Amtrak's passengers and crew. This is second nature to me. I spent nearly twenty years in a variety of roles at DOT, which is primarily a safety regulatory agency. Safety infused everything we did. For example, many of the projects we selected for ARRA funding involved elimination of at-grade rail crossings or safety improvements on rail lines and bridges.

My second priority would be to continue to improve passenger service. To do so, strong relationships with the private railroads that host Amtrak services, and with Amtrak's state and local partners, are essential. If confirmed, I would leverage my past experience to push for Amtrak to expand the services it provides in partnership with these stakeholders.

A third priority is rigorous financial stewardship: making the best use of the taxpayer dollars Amtrak receives. Amtrak's Board should ensure that the greatly increased funding Congress has provided in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is spent in a cost-efficient manner that maximizes public benefits. I have had several significant relevant past experiences managing an influx of federal funds; during the Recovery Act, in Iraq, at the Small Business Administration after Hurricane Katrina, and with Amtrak during the pandemic.

I am joined today by my better half... Chiling Tong, the President of the National Asian Pacific American Chamber of Commerce and Entrepreneurship (National ACE). For the last 23 years our passion project has been the foundation we established to promote civic awareness, involvement, and effectiveness among AANHPI college students. This summer, the International Leadership Foundation has brought 34 Fellows to Washington, DC to intern in federal government offices, including the White House and with the Senate Majority Leader. Several of our fellows are here to witness today's confirmation hearing.

I thank you again for your consideration. I am also grateful to Senator McConnell for recommending me to the President, and to President Biden for nominating me. I look forward to answering any questions you may have today.