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ESPA EXPRESS

*News From The
Empire State Passengers Association*

*Register
Now*

2026 ESPA

**(& Rail Passengers Association
Northeast Division)**

Annual Meeting & Lunch

Saturday, March 14, 2026

11:00am to 4:00pm

DoubleTree Hotel

Schenectady

- Complete Info On Page 7 -



Passenger Rail Symposium Held In Syracuse - Bruce Becker



'Improving Passenger Rail in The Empire Corridor', a one-day advocacy symposium was held in Syracuse on Wednesday November 19, 2025. Over 40 attendees participated in the event co-hosted by ESPA and the newly organized non-profit Empire State Passengers Foundation. Elected officials joined with business & community leaders from across the state.

Speakers & presenters included:

State Senator Rachel May - 48th Senate District
Assemblyperson William Magnarelli - 129th Assembly District; Chair, Assembly Transportation Committee
Hon. J. Ryan McMahon II - Onondaga County Executive
Jason Orthner - Director, North Carolina State Rail Program - NCDOT
Christine Fix - Director of Planning - Virginia Passenger Rail Authority
Lucas Peilert - Strategy Director - Siemens Mobility North America
Ray Hessinger - Director - NYS DOT Freight & Passenger Rail Bureau
Robert Provost - President, NYS Tourism Industry Association
Harold Becker - NYS Business Council
Henry Litsky - Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, Reconnect Rochester

Attendees uniformly agreed that the Symposium was a valuable opportunity to network and to learn how they can advocate for passenger rail improvements in their regions of the state. And attendees also enthusiastically endorsed the holding of such Symposiums in the future.

Related articles on information learned at the Symposium are included in this issue and videos of the presentations are available at www.esparail.org.

Empire Corridor Sold-Out Trains - Gary Prophet

The lack of passenger capacity on the Empire Corridor has reached epic proportions. As of a couple days before Thanksgiving, an incredible 77 trains over a couple weeks were sold out on the Empire Corridor. This is much different than having trains sold out just on the peak days of travel during the busy Thanksgiving weekend, which is typically what occurs on other Amtrak corridors. Every Empire Corridor train has been operating with just 4 coaches and either a café/business class or lounge car since early in 2025 and it appears that no additional cars were added for either the Thanksgiving or Christmas peak days of travel. In prior years, several cars would usually be added to Empire Corridor trains on the peak days of travel. Additionally, no cars were added to the Lake Shore Limited over this year's holiday period.

Amtrak has repeatedly stated that their chronic equipment shortage, which was exasperated by the removal from service of the entire Horizon fleet earlier in 2025, is the cause of the constrained equipment situation.

(Continued On Page 5 - Sell-Outs)

Executive Director's Report: Steve Strauss

Happy 2026 everyone. The Empire State Passengers Association is rolling out of 2025 with significant wins for train riders in New York and the many communities that benefit from better connectivity.

After the disappointment of losing seats and train frequencies in the Hudson Valley, pressure from riders, ESPA and our legislative allies in the Hudson Valley & Capital Region succeeded in gaining the Governor's attention. She announced the restoration of one of the suspended daily Amtrak roundtrips, which started December 1st and surprised everyone with the announcement that Metro-North would make one daily round-trip between Grand Central and Albany-Rensselaer. The train should offer over 500 seats and flat fares of around \$38 between Grand Central & Albany. The Metro-North frequency will begin in the spring and ESPA is pushing for it to make a stop at 125th Street.



The other big news was about stations, with Amtrak acknowledging to ESPA that a full high-level platform is coming to Saratoga Springs (see story in the Fall 2025 ESPA Express). Preliminary engineering is underway. And at Rhinecliff, ESPA pressed NYS DOT hard on the importance of fixing the parking lot potholes and restriping the spaces after Amtrak initiated daily parking fees. DOT spoke with Amtrak and riders now have a repaved lot and striped spaces as partial compensation for the new parking fees. (See more on Rhinecliff in this issue of the Express.)

I joined allies from Ohio on two calls with Amtrak Government Affairs Manager Margaret Clark this fall. Ohio is new territory for Margaret and she's working hard to get up to speed on a state with no State-supported trains. Ohio folks are seeking legislative support for a Congressional directive to Amtrak to begin planning for a partial second Lakeshore frequency between Detroit and NYC. I also attended a City and State Transportation Summit, listened to two Zooms with Andy Byford discussing ideas for Penn Station and joined a 15th anniversary reception for the NEC Commission.

Working with our sister organization, the Empire State Passengers Foundation and its President, Bruce Becker, I assisted in organizing a very successful first, and maybe annual, symposium on Improving Passenger Rail in the Empire Corridor. Approximately 45 people traveled to Syracuse for this informative one-day event. Read more about it in this issue of the Express.

By the time you read this newsletter I will have taken my first 2026 trip to Albany to meet with legislators and their staff to talk about passenger rail matters. I urge you to register for ESPA's Annual Meeting in Schenectady on Saturday, March 14th. An exciting program is coming together.

Steve

Ontario Northlander Returns - Gary Prophet

The Ontario Northland Railroad, which is an agency of the Province of Ontario, will resume the "Ontario Northlander" passenger rail service from Toronto, ON to Timmons, ON, starting this coming summer. The train will utilize new Siemens 3-car trainsets specifically built for the service, which will offer both coach and business-class seating. The route is about 460 miles in length and even though the train will run overnight it will not have any sleeping accommodations.

The new train is bringing back a passenger rail service that was discontinued in 2012 by Via Rail. This service will depart Timmons southbound around midnight, from North Bay about 6am, and arrive in Toronto at about 11am. The northbound will depart Toronto at 6:30pm, from North Bay about 11:30pm and arrive at Timmons before 6am. The train will operate daily from July to December and 4 days a week from January to June.

There will be 7 station stops south of North Bay and 5 station stops north of North Bay, in addition to the two endpoints. The schedule is set to serve North Bay to Toronto during the evening and morning hours, with the overnight portion north of North Bay. A rail bypass around the North Bay yard is already complete and shelters are being built at the smaller stops and a new station at Timmons-Porcupine is almost complete.



Ontario Northlander Railroad

MTA Fare Hikes Start January 4th - Gary Prophet

Starting on January 4, 2026, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) implemented fare increases which had been approved by the Authority in September 2025. Base subway and bus fares were raised from \$ 2.90 to \$ 3.00 per trip. LIRR and Metro-North fares were raised by 4% to 8%, except for trips within Connecticut, as those fares were raised last year. In addition, the west of Hudson Metro-North lines were exempt from any fare hikes both last and this year.



For the commuter rail lines, the issue larger than the actual fare increase has been the changes in fare rules on Metro-North and LIRR. The 10-trip off-peak tickets were eliminated and the paper tickets, which previously were valid for 60 days, now expire at 4am the day after they are purchased. This results in passengers not being able to purchase tickets in advance and the elimination of the 10-trip off-peak results in those passengers now paying about 20% more for tickets (loss of discount plus fare hike) and having to purchase tickets every day they travel.

In addition, Metro-North and LIRR has now implemented an "activation penalty" for tickets activated on board trains via the MTA App. It has long been noted that some passengers would only "activate" their ticket via the app when they saw the conductor approaching. If the conductor did not come through the train (which seemed to be a more common occurrence on the LIRR than on Metro-North), passengers would not activate their ticket and thus not pay for their trip. Now, if one doesn't activate their ticket before boarding, the MTA App will charge the passenger an \$8.00 penalty. The penalty must be paid before the MTA App will allow the person to use the MTA App again. The MTA App knows what train you are on and knows when the train departs each station, so one is not charged for a "late activation" if the train is late and the passenger is still on the platform. With the new "fare policies" for Metro-North and LIRR, it, in theory, means that conductors no longer need to collect tickets, as the paper tickets expire same day (technically 4 hours after midnight), and MTA App tickets must be activated before boarding.

ESPA President, Gary Prophet, spoke at the public hearings on the fare increases and "fare policy" changes and also spoke in person at the September 30 MTA Board Meeting when the approval vote occurred. He spoke against the elimination of the 10-trip tickets and the expiration of paper tickets on the same day and he encouraged the MTA Board to freeze fares for several years, especially the new \$ 3.00 subway and bus fare. Gary also mentioned, as other speakers did, that not allowing the purchase of tickets in advance has several direct passenger inconveniences: People arriving at JFK Airport in the evening must worry about finding a ticket machine while carrying luggage and/or a child; lines at ticket machines; people having to find a ticket machine in a remote, isolated station they are not familiar with; and single woman traveling alone having to walk further to a ticket machine.

The revised fares do include a new "Day Pass" which is valid for unlimited travel between the selected zone pairs from the time of purchase until 4 a.m. the following day and the MTA Board made senior fares valid during the morning peak hours, as they were already valid during the afternoon peak hours of travel on Metro-North and LIRR.

New York State Ridership Stats

Route	YTD FY' _ October - November											Nov. '25 Customer OTP
	Nov. '25	Nov. '24	Nov. '19	2026	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	
Empire Service	106,200 <small>101% of 2019 #</small>	112,600	105,500	220,500 <small>101% of 2019 #</small>	244,000	222,500	188,600	183,100	70,400	216,200	217,600	86.9%
Maple Leaf	37,400 <small>121% of 2019 #</small>	40,000	30,800	75,500 <small>115% of 2019 #</small>	83,800	85,000	70,900	62,500	30,400	62,700	65,300	80.0%
Adirondack	5,800 <small>77% of 2019 #</small>	6,700	7,500	14,000 <small>75% of 2019 #</small>	15,100	15,800	0	0	0	18,800	21,400	71.4%
Ethan Allen Exp.	7,300 <small>174% of 2019 #</small>	2,700	4,200	15,600 <small>193% of 2019 #</small>	10,500	15,000	15,800	8,400	0	8,500	8,100	64.2%
Lake Shore Lim.	30,300 <small>99% of 2019 #</small>	33,000	30,500	60,700 <small>99% of 2019 #</small>	65,500	67,700	66,200	55,000	20,900	61,400	61,100	80.8%

Data Source - Amtrak Monthly Performance Reports

NYS Route Definitions

Empire Service - Passengers On New York To Albany-Rensselaer Trains & Passengers Solely On Other Trains Between New York & Albany-Rensselaer
Maple Leaf - Passengers On West of Albany To Syracuse- Buffalo - Niagara Falls - Toronto Trains
Adirondack - Passengers On Train North Of Albany To Montreal **Ethan Allen Express** - Passengers On Train North Of Albany to Burlington
Lake Shore Limited - Passengers On New York/Boston - Albany - Buffalo - Cleveland - Chicago Train

Empire Corridor Improvement Phased Implementation - Benjamin Turon

Among the speakers at the 'Improving Passenger Rail in The Empire Corridor' Symposium was Ray Hessinger, the Director of the Freight and Passenger Rail Bureau at New York State DOT. Mr. Hessinger discussed the updating of the Empire Corridor's Service Development Plan as part of the federal Corridor Identification and Development Program.

NYSDOT received a \$500,000 grant as part of the Corridor ID program in 2024 for the Empire Corridor. The end result of the Corridor ID process is a Service Development Plan — which because the Empire Corridor already has from the Final Tier One Environmental Impact Statement released in 2023, will be an update. In addition to updating the data and analysis, the Service Development Plan will be modified for phased implementation of the proposed program — and this is the biggest and most exciting news to come out of the symposium.

During his presentation Mr. Hessinger stated: ***“How do we get one more? What do we have to do to get one more?”*** (referring to additional train frequencies on the corridor). ***“The EIS and Service Development Plan didn't do that type of analysis. So that is one of the most important things that will come out of the [updated] Service Development Plan for the Empire Corridor is the phased implementation of how do we get from four, to five, to six, to seven, to eight...Do we have to build 320 miles of new third track to get one train? I would say no — but is it zero? Probably not. So, we need to do the analysis in partnership with CSX to see what we have to do to get one more train; what we have to do to get two, three, four.”***

An emphasis on the phased implementation of the updated Service Development Plan, should make the program an easier sell to both the public and politicians, as more near-term benefits, in increased train frequency and reduced travel times, will be more readily apparent and easier to appreciate. This should present the Service Development Plan in terms that people can think and plan their lives and businesses around, dividing up the costs and benefits in a more comprehensible fashion. Yes — passengers want a great service, but they also want additional trains they can ride sooner, rather than later.

And the existing Service Development Plan is already being implemented incrementally, with work now underway on the replacement of the Livingston Ave Bridge over the Hudson River between Rensselaer and Albany, a \$635 million project. Work will also soon be underway to renovate and rebuild the historic station at Rhinecliff, including a new high-level platform that will allow level boarding of trains by passengers.

Phased Implementation for the Empire Corridor in a new Service Development Plan will provide a better roadmap to better intercity passenger service by offering options to policymakers in Albany & Washington, allowing them to see how increasing capital spending on various rail infrastructure projects would positively affect rail service in both the nearer and longer term.

Corridor ID Program 101 - Benjamin Turon

The Federal Railroad Administration's Corridor Identification and Development Program was created by the Infrastructure and Investment Act (IIJA), as a comprehensive program focused on developing existing, and potential, intercity passenger rail corridors across the nation. The IIJA is also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, was signed into law by President Joe Biden in November 2021 with the Act providing funding for infrastructure improvements across the United States, including significant new funding for passenger rail.

As of December 2023, a total of 69 passenger rail corridors have been accepted into the Corridor ID Program. Each route accepted into the program is granted \$500,000 toward planning activities, proceed through three planning steps, and is prioritized for future federal funding.

The three steps of Corridor ID are:

- **Step One:** Determination of the scope, schedule, and cost estimate for preparing a Service Development Plan.
- **Step Two:** Preparation of the Service Development Plan, which lists details including train frequencies, peak and average operating speeds, trip times, station locations, capital projects, rolling stock needs, economic impacts, environmental benefits, and the project schedule.
- **Step Three:** Project development work readying the Service Development Plan for implementation, such as environmental impact statements and engineering design for discrete projects.

There are two Corridor ID routes that NYSDOT is working on, for the Empire Corridor and Adirondack Corridor. However, New York State is also involved in the Green Mountain and Vermonter corridors sponsored by Vtrans and Boston-Albany East-West Rail by MassDOT.

Amtrak is undertaking a Corridor ID for extending Northeast Regional service to Ronkonkoma on Long Island. And PennDOT is working on its planned Scranton service which will start in New York Penn Station, and someday could be extended to Binghamton in the Southern Tier.

Rhinecliff Station & Platform Project Update - Steve Strauss

It has been 3½ years since the Biden Administration announced the award of a \$28.22 million Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail grant to New York State DOT for the construction of a new, high-level platform and canopy at the Rhinecliff station. The project includes associated track realignment, new stairs & elevators and the replacement of the overhead bridge from the station to the platform.

After many delays, partially due to the time NYS DOT took to revise plans to reflect scope expansion resulting from the size of the federal grant and the FRA's requirement for an 8-car high level platform rather than the six-car platform in the original design, there is finally some forward movement.

The Federal Railroad Administration relented on its requirement that the Amtrak station restoration work and the more complex track and platform work be considered as one combined project. Accordingly, Amtrak commenced its final Section 106 historic preservation review with the NYS Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for the station restoration work. This project went to the SHPO with a "No Adverse Impact" finding and the SHPO concurred with the decision made by the FRA to classify the station building work as a "Categorical Exclusion" thereby completing the National Environmental Policy Work (NEPA) for the project. Amtrak is in the process of soliciting bids and hopes to make a construction award in the first half of 2026.

Shortly after the Amtrak building project went to the SHPO, NYS DOT submitted the revised plans for the track, platform, canopy, and bridge work to the Preservation Office. Because of the magnitude of the work, which in an historic district, the FRA classified this project as having an "Adverse Impact" on the historic district. This classification sounds worse than it actually is, as the finding simply gives the SHPO additional tools to work with DOT to assure that the project's impact on the historic district is minimized. Other interested parties, including ESPA, may provide the SHPO, NYS DOT and FRA with comments on the design and preservation impact as well.

Once the SHPO and NYS DOT reach agreement on any recommended design changes to the project, the FRA should issue a Categorical Exclusion for the platform part of the station project as well. NYS DOT will then finalize the design, obtain approval from Amtrak and CSX, and then put the project out for bid. Unfortunately, it is likely to be two years before construction gets underway.

Given the delays and significant construction inflation since 2022, NYS DOT will likely need to commit additional funds beyond their planned \$11.8 million to complete the platform project. ESPA will continue to follow this story closely.

Sell-Outs (Continued From Page 1)

Some Empire Corridor trains were sold out 3 to 5 weeks in advance, meaning that they would have easily sold out even if the number of cars were doubled on those trains. We note that by November 19, the departure of Train 281 from New York City on December 23 was already sold out. And on October 12, all Empire Corridor trains both to the north and west of Albany on November 30 (Sunday after Thanksgiving), were sold out for anyone wishing to board in New York City or in the lower Hudson Valley.

Starting December 1, one of the discontinued Albany to New York City daily roundtrip trains did return to the schedule, which provided a little relief. But even during the "slow" January travel period, 5 trains were sold out departing New York City on each of the first two Sundays of January. Additional relief will be coming this spring with the addition of one 7-car Metro North daily roundtrip between New York's Grand Central Terminal and Albany-Rensselaer.

The prospects for any near-term additional Amtrak capacity is bleak, but ESPA is hopeful that the reallocation of cars to the Empire Corridor may come starting in 2027 as the new Siemens Airo trainsets enter service on the Northeast Corridor.

ESPA and the Empire State Passengers Foundation thank the following sponsors of the November 2025 'Improving Passenger Rail in The Empire Corridor' Symposium for their generous support!



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Share Fares provide a group discount of up to 60% off tickets for 8 passengers traveling together on the same reservation. Here's how the discount works: Passenger 1 – full price (or lowest available fare); Groups of 2 – full price (or lowest available fare); Groups of 3 – 15% off all tickets; Groups of 4 – 25% off all tickets; Groups of 5 – 37% off all tickets; Groups of 6 – 47% off all tickets; Groups of 7 – 54% off all tickets; Groups of 8 – 60% off all tickets. 2-day advance purchase required. Other terms & conditions apply.

Visit Amtrak.com; click on 'Deals' at the top, then click on 'Deals & Promotions' and then 'Share Fares'

Reminder...The popular 'I Love New York' 15% Discount continues to be offered for travel to/from all New York State destinations on Empire Corridor trains & the Ethan Allen Express. The current promotional offer is valid through 2026. **NEW...**Reservations must be made at least **1 day** in advance of travel; black-out dates and other restrictions apply. The 15% discount is not available for travel on the Lake Shore Limited.

Visit Amtrak.com; click on 'Deals' at the top, then click on 'Deals & Promotions' and scroll down to the 'See NY & Save 15%' option to take advantage of this great offer.



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Save 15%



Save on Group
Travel with
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Wikipedia

Station Advisories:

- The waiting room (left) of the **Rome, NY** station is back in use after a short period of construction last fall.
- Parking at the **Buffalo-Depew, NY** station has temporarily returned to near full capacity, as the project to reconstruct the boarding platform is on break for the winter. It is anticipated that parking will once again be affected in the spring as work re-commences. Passengers will be encouraged to be dropped-off then or they may use any of various private lots located across from the Buffalo Niagara International Airport, approximately 2.5 miles away. Parking and transportation to the station will be the customer's responsibility.

ESPA Meetings

ESPA members and ALL other interested persons are welcome & encouraged to participate in ESPA Meetings!

Check 'Events' at www.esparail.org for the most current meeting information! Advance registration is required!

Upcoming ESPA Meetings



**2026 ESPA (& RPA)
Annual Meeting
Saturday, March 14
11:00am - 4:00pm
DoubleTree Hotel -
Schenectady**

Dates, times & locations are subject to change!

ESPA Membership

- ☐ Introductory Membership (\$20.00 for first year)
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46th Annual Meeting
of the
Empire State Passengers Association
and
Rail Passengers Association's Northeast Division
Saturday, March 14, 2026 **11:00am – 4:00pm**
DoubleTree Hotel 100 Nott Terrace Schenectady, NY
Five Blocks From The Amtrak Station – Free Parking

Invited Speakers & Presentations:

Representatives From Federal, State & Local Government, Amtrak & Allied Organizations

Speakers To Be Announced As They Are Confirmed!

Full Registration Includes The Meeting, A Three Course Luncheon & Beverage Breaks

Full Early Bird Discount Registration - \$72.00 Per Person
(Registrations Must Be Processed/Post Marked By March 4th)

Full Late Registration - \$85.00 Per Person
(ALL Registrations Processed/Post Marked After March 4th And At The Door)

Meeting ONLY Registration (No Lunch or Beverages) - \$40.00 Per Person

Please complete and return this form with your check for the appropriate registration fee, to be received **NO** later than **March 7, 2026**. (**NO** cancellations after this date).

Please Note: Written confirmation of your meeting registration and payment having been received is **NOT** provided unless specifically requested (i.e. tickets are not mailed to you in advance of the meeting). **Meeting registration begins in the DoubleTree Ballroom foyer at 10:00am.**

Please make checks payable to '**ESPA**' and mail to:

Bruce Becker - ESPA
8175 Old Post Road East
East Amherst, NY 14051

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

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_____ I will be arriving into Schenectady on: ☐ Tr. # 280 ☐ Tr. #63 ☐ Other

_____ I will need transportation assistance to/from the Amtrak Station



**More Information &
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at www.esparail.org**

Siemens Charger Locomotives are entering service on both Amtrak & Metro North routes in 2026.

The Amtrak versions are straight diesels for use on longer-distance trains and are part of a 75-unit order nearly fulfillment.

The Metro North versions are dual-mode third-rail electric & diesel units and will be used on all MN routes. It is noteworthy that they will be able to operate in electric mode over MN's entire third-rail territory at full track speeds.



Amtrak Crew Qualifying Test Trip On January 7, 2026
North Of Rhinecliff



Metro North Train From Poughkeepsie To GCT On January 10, 2026



Sleeping car passengers departing Chicago on the Lake Shore Limited are now regularly offered a complimentary **cheese plate** and their choice of beverage (wine, beer or soft drink). Passengers can enjoy the evening snack in the dining car or have it delivered to their room.

And to further enhance the overall dining experience, the 'Flexible Dining' menu items are now plated in the kitchen and then presented to the passengers. The dining car is also using linen tablecloths and stainless steel cutlery.

On December 16, Buffalo's light rail, called Metro-Rail, extended its single route about 1200 feet further south to the former Delaware, Lackawanna & Western (DL&W) Terminal trainshed, where a new station has been constructed. Many decades ago, this was the Buffalo terminus of the Lackawanna Railroad. The first level of the structure has been the Metro Rail maintenance center since the 1980's, but the second floor, where the boarding platforms had previously been, is slated to be re-developed over the next few years. In addition, a walkway will be built in 2026 to directly connect this new station to the KeyBank Center, where the Buffalo Sabres play their home games. Once the "Shoreline Trail", a walkway along the Buffalo River, is completed, the DL&W Station will provide direct access.

