



NORTH COAST HIAWATHA
INFORMATION PROVIDED BY
THE DR&MR CLUB

The Dickinson Railfanning & Model Railroading Club is giving this presentation in hopes of telling the Dickinson City Commission more information on Amtrak's *North Coast Hiawatha*.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE DICKINSON RAILFANNING & MODEL RAILROADING CLUB

- The Dickinson Railfanning & Model Railroading Club (DR&MR Club) was founded in 2023 to provide a communication link between Dickinson-area railfans and model railroaders.
- Railfanning is the hobby of watching trains.
- This DR&MR Club presentation will show some additional accurate information on the *North Coast Hiawatha*.
- If anyone is interested in joining the DR&MR Club, please talk to Marek Ficek after the presentation is over.
- If you have any questions about the information in this presentation, please feel free to interrupt.

THE *EMPIRE BUILDER*

- The *Empire Builder* is named after a former Great Northern Railroad train of the same name. In North Dakota it runs along the same route, which passes through Fargo, Grand Forks, Minot, and Williston.
- Let us consider a railfan taking a trip on the *Empire Builder* from Fargo to Minneapolis. He must arrive at the Fargo station before 3:29 AM. The train will arrive in Minneapolis at 8:39 AM. He will pay at least \$41. If he wants a private compartment, then he must pay an impressive \$193! The trip will take him 5 hours and 4 minutes.
- The *Empire Builder* runs along BNSF's High Line, the former Great Northern mainline. It is a more efficient rail line than the former Northern Pacific mainline that Dickinson is on.

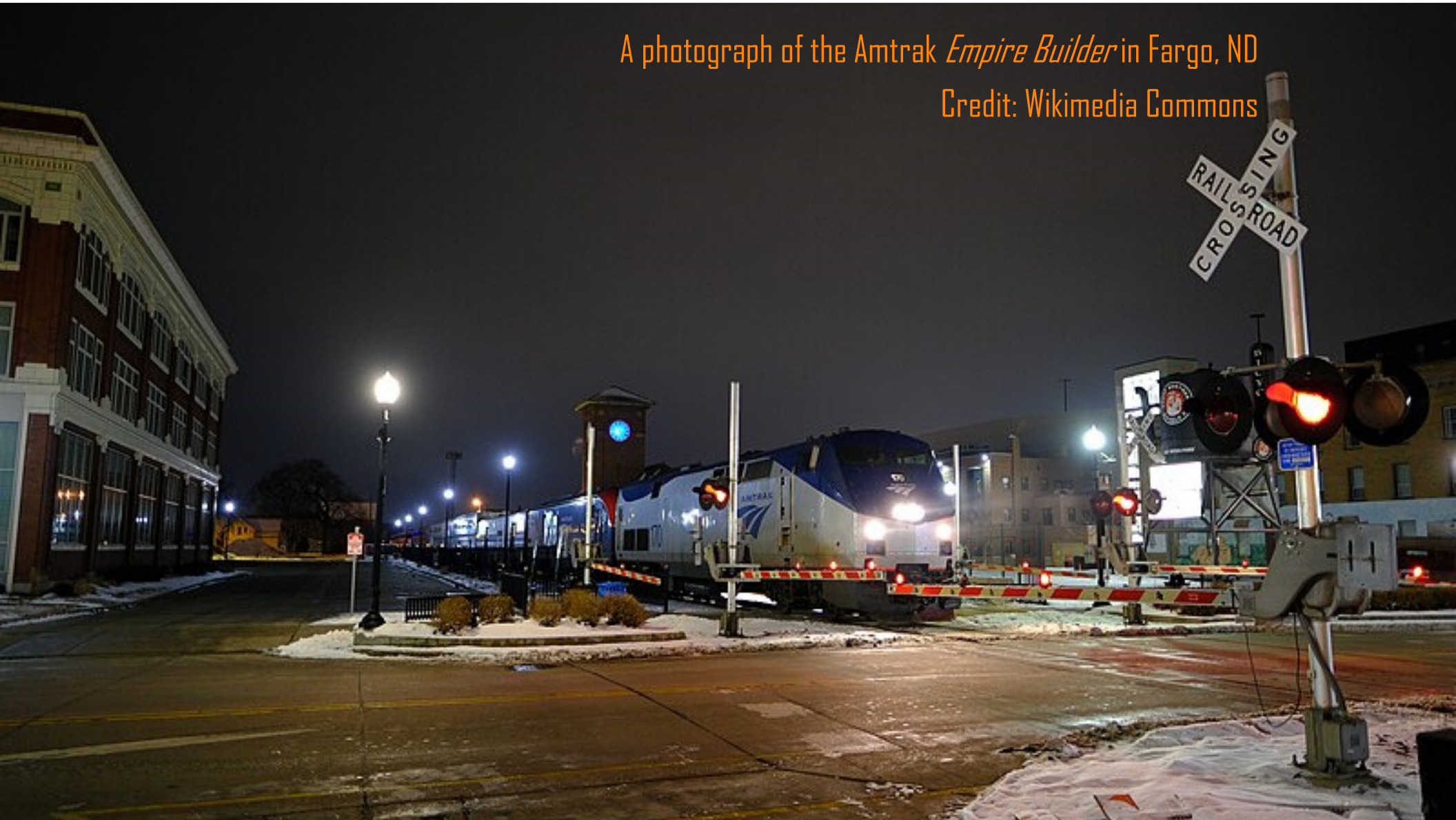
A postcard picture of the Great Northern *Empire Builder* somewhere
in Washington
Credit: Wikimedia Commons



THE *EMPIRE BUILDER* (CONT.)

- In 2022, the *Empire Builder* carried 295,000 passengers. It had a gross revenue of \$49,600,000. Only 65% of the \$76,300,000 cost of operating the train is recovered in the revenue. However, it is the most popular long-distance Amtrak train and the second most “profitable”.
- In 2022, \$6.731 billion was appropriated federally to operate Amtrak. Amtrak has never been able to make a profit or even pay for itself. According to the federal DOT, Amtrak has a net revenue of *negative* \$5,668,700,000.
- Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority mentioned the *Empire Builder* in their presentation, but had several inaccuracies—most notably the revenue from it.

A photograph of the Amtrak *Empire Builder* in Fargo, ND
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

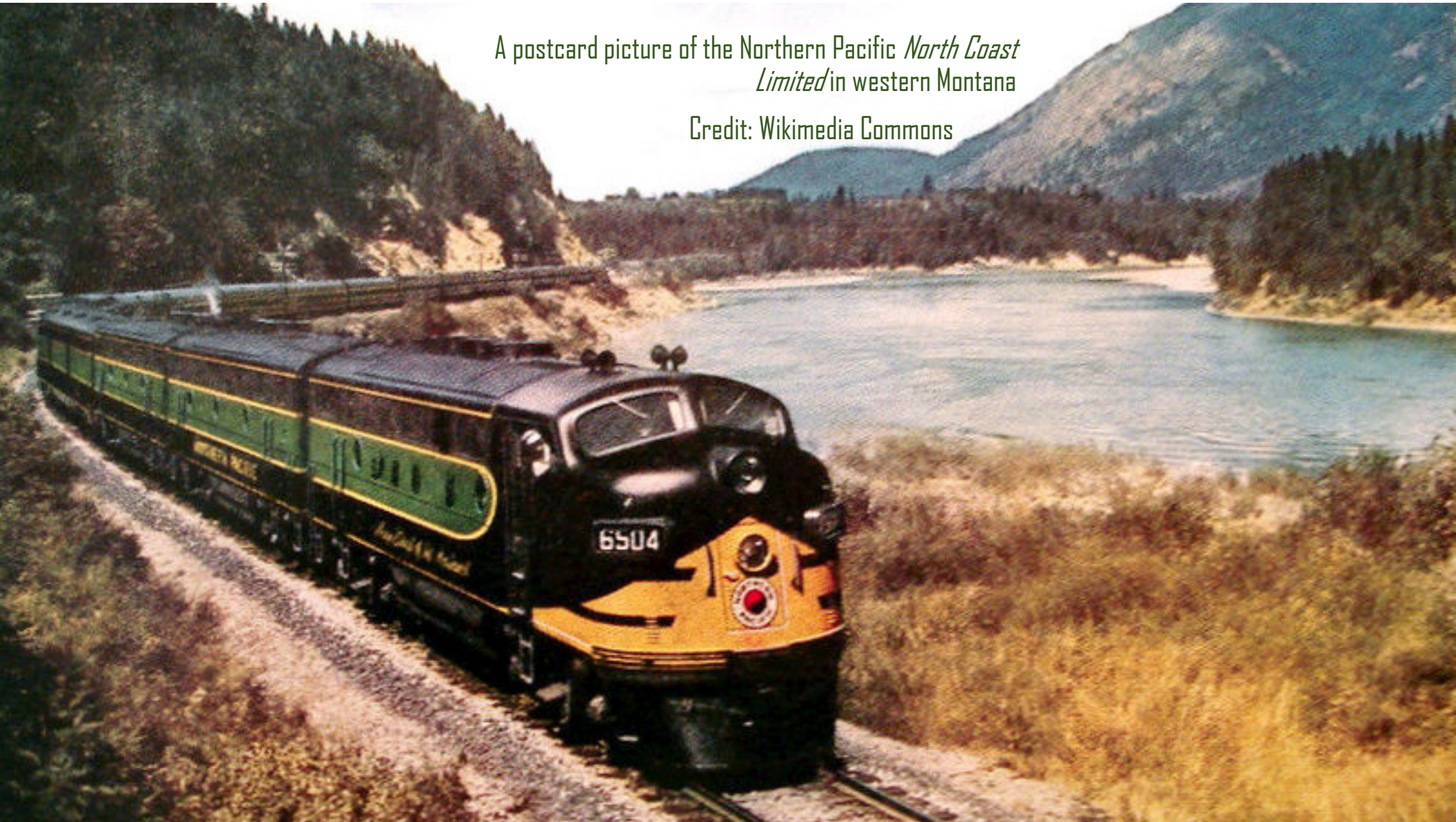


THE *NORTH COAST HIAWATHA*

- The *North Coast Hiawatha* grew out of the *North Coast Limited* and the *Mainstreeter*. Both of these were operated by the Northern Pacific. The *North Coast Limited* was the NP's premier train, while the *Mainstreeter* was the cheaper (and slower) version. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Railroad Depression began.
- The Railroad Depression was the result of heavy government subsidization of airlines and the creation of the Interstate and highway road systems. This caused many railroads to lose money, particularly in passenger service. Many railroads went bankrupt. In order to alleviate the Railroad Depression, the government created Amtrak in 1970. Amtrak nationalized passenger service and weakly struggled on. In 1971 Amtrak took over the *North Coast Limited*, merging it, the Milwaukee Road's *Hiawatha*, and the *Mainstreeter* into the *North Coast Hiawatha*. Thus began its uncertain existence.

A postcard picture of the Northern Pacific *North Coast Limited* in western Montana

Credit: Wikimedia Commons



THE *NORTH COAST HIAWATHA* (CONT.)

- The *North Coast Hiawatha* ran until 1979, passing through such towns as Fargo, Jamestown, Bismarck, and Dickinson. Then, along with several other trains, it was discontinued due to Amtrak's particularly devastating finances. The *Empire Builder* was kept due to its greater efficiency. **The *North Coast Hiawatha* recovered only ¼ of its 24 million dollar operating costs in 1979.**
- Railroads that work with Amtrak can provide some combination of rolling stock, money, or trackage rights to Amtrak. However, railroads partnered with Amtrak cannot run their own passenger trains. Amtrak owns very little trackage; it primarily uses the trackage of other railroads, such as BNSF. BNSF runs through Dickinson.

It would be cheaper to buy every Chicago-Seattle rail passenger a free \$170 plane ticket and two drinks than it is to operate the [*North Coast*] *Hiawatha*.

—US Secretary of Transportation Brock Adams, 1979

A picture of the Amtrak *North Coast Hiawatha* at Missoula, MT

Credit: Wikimedia Commons



THE *NORTH COAST HIAWATHA* (CONT.)

- Montana has been the most vocal supporter of the train's return, with the latest attempt being the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority.
- In 2009, Amtrak published a feasibility study on returning the *North Coast Hiawatha*. This study projected a ridership of approximately 359,800 on a daily schedule. It was thought that some of these would have otherwise used the *Empire Builder*. Amtrak estimated that \$1 billion would be needed to restart the train. More than \$300 million of this would be for rolling stock. After it would be agreed upon, they estimated that it would take 4-5 years for the service to actually return. Counting the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority's 8 estimated minimum years to get them to begin, that is at least 12 years of waiting for the train.

WHAT'S AN AMSHACK?

- Amtrak, perpetually broke, wants to save money. They have attempted to standardize stations. This has largely resulted in quite a few very small stations. **These small, unmanned stations were not unlike a bus stop. It did not take long for them to be called "Amshacks".** It is very likely that Amtrak will construct one of these, rather than use the existing depot. Even if the depot is put in good condition, it still will need to be maintained—very expensive.
- Even if an Amshack is not used, Amtrak may construct a more traditional station rather than use the original depot. Even in Fargo, where there is not one but two depots, Amtrak still has a small station.



A picture of an Amshack next to the original depot in Rowlesburg, WV

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Amshack

Depot

Amtrak can't even keep the "0" on their
Fargo station from falling down!
Credit: DR&MR Club Archives



TRUE ADVANCED PROPULSION

- Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority mentioned that one of their goals is for the *North Coast Hiawatha* to have "advanced propulsion": hydrogen. In comparison to what is known as a straight-electric locomotive, a hydrogen locomotive is impractical and inefficient. A typical diesel-electric locomotive, as used almost exclusively on BNSF, is extremely efficient. Electric power is generated by the diesel engine, sent to the control stand, and from there to the motors. On a straight electric, the power is instead picked up from a catenary or a third rail. Straight electrics are more efficient than all other locomotives. Additionally, they are far less volatile than battery-electrics and hydrogen. The Wabash Cannonball is a lot better than the Wabash Fireball!
- So, why don't all the railroads use them? The catenary or third rail tends to be extremely expensive to install.

OTHER REPERCUSSIONS

- Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority suggested that the *North Coast Hiawatha* would allow for improved freight service. On a small branchline, the upgrades needed to handle passenger traffic would indeed allow for faster freight. However, Dickinson is on BNSF's mainline. The only things that would be needed are stations and sidings—neither of which would affect freight traffic.
- Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority wanted the *North Coast Hiawatha* to run two round trips every day. Very few of Amtrak's trains run more than one roundtrip each day. Those that do generally run short distances between highly populated cities on the East and West Coasts. It is unlikely that the *North Coast Hiawatha* would receive such treatment. Even when it existed, it spent much of its life on a tri-weekly schedule.
- Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority was right in that businesses are going to want to be near the station, but there are very few people who want a train honking all night long next to their house!
- All those passengers are going to want to cross Villard Street. More crosswalk lights or, preferably, signals, would be a safe choice.

OTHER SOLUTIONS

\$

1. The City of Dickinson helps to subsidize a small company that runs along some or all of the proposed route. Subsidization is not always a good thing, however.

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2. The City of Dickinson does not necessarily need passenger service. Part of the reason that Amtrak kept the *Empire Builder* and not the *North Coast Hiawatha* was that the *North Coast Hiawatha* route had better transportation options such as the Interstate, Highway 10, and the airports. Why not put that money to more urgent usage, such as repairing the poor NP cabooses in Prairie Outpost Park? The cabooses are badly damaged.

\$

3. Money does not need to be spent. Save it for future projects.

NP caboose 4030

Credit: DR&MR Club Archives



SUMMARY

- Amtrak is largely unprofitable and the *North Coast Hiawatha* would significantly increase federal taxes.
- Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority's presentation was misleadingly optimistic.
- Dickinson does not *require* passenger service, having other options.
- It is doubtful if the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority will have much control of the situation.
- Even if Amtrak were to return, it is questionable if the desired effect would happen. The situation may have significantly changed in 12-plus years that it will take to bring the *North Coast Hiawatha* back.

SOURCES

Trains

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- <https://www.trains.com/ctr/photos-videos/photo-of-the-day/north-coast-limited/>

The Diesel Shop

- http://www.thedieselshop.us/Electric_Intro.HTML
- <http://www.thedieselshop.us/AMTRAK.HTML>

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- <https://www.amtrak.com/home>

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- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire_Builder
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Coast_Hiawatha

Federal DOT

- https://www.bts.gov/archive/publications/multimodal_transportation_indicators/2015_08/passenger/amtrak_miles
- <https://www.bts.gov/content/average-passenger-revenue-passenger-mile>
- <https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/54902>
- Many assorted railroad-related articles from numerous sources, official railroad documents, and lots of personal experience with the railroads.



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