



Elimination of Fares for Amtrak Cascades Passengers 18 Years Old and Under

Status Report to the Transportation Committees of the Washington State Legislature

December 1, 2022

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Elimination of Fares for Amtrak Cascades Passengers 18 Years Old and Under – Status Report

This report provides a snapshot summary of activities the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) has undertaken to date toward implementing the youth fare program for Amtrak Cascades as directed in ESSB 5974. WSDOT is working with both Amtrak and the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) on this implementation.

The 2022 Washington State Legislature passed a 16-year transportation funding package that included requirements for public transportation providers in the state to offer free fares for riders ages 18 years old and under. Most public transit agencies were required to implement this new youth fare program by October 1, 2022. Since Amtrak Cascades intercity passenger rail service operates in two states and Canada, the Legislature did not impose this same deadline for the state-sponsored passenger trains, but instead instructed WSDOT to report back to the transportation committees of the Legislature by December 1, 2022, on the results of negotiations with the Oregon Department of Transportation and the status of the fare policy request submitted by WSDOT to Amtrak.¹

New Amtrak Cascades Youth Fare Program – Status Summary

Statutory requirements

- ESSB 5974 directed WSDOT to submit a request to Amtrak by October 1, 2022. WSDOT submitted a request to Amtrak on September 14, 2022, to identify necessary changes and determine potential effects related to the adoption of the new youth fare program. WSDOT also is directed to negotiate with ODOT to determine ridership, revenue, and policy impacts relating to elimination of fares for Amtrak Cascades passengers 18 years of age and younger.

ODOT coordination

- Since the passage of ESSB 5974, WSDOT and ODOT have engaged monthly in discussions regarding the new youth fare program. Program elements were shared with ODOT staff and they are overall supportive of the youth fare program implementation in Washington. Prior to final concurrence, ODOT requests estimates from Amtrak on potential financial impacts (costs and revenues) for youth fare program implementation.

Amtrak coordination

- WSDOT and Amtrak have established a team to develop the youth fare program framework, explore implementation options, assess program risks, and create a preliminary program implementation schedule. This team meets on a bi-weekly basis and will continue to do so through implementation.

¹ Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5974, Section 420.

Preliminary cost considerations

The following information on preliminary costs, ridership, and revenue impacts is supplied by Amtrak. Amtrak provided a range of costs dependent on implementation of certain program elements. WSDOT will evaluate items that require further analysis (identified below) and proposed program elements, negotiating final costs with Amtrak.

- Amtrak estimates that the one-time initial cost of re-configuring its ticket reservations systems to add the new Amtrak Cascades youth fare program will be approximately \$1.3 million.
- Amtrak estimates that the number of riders 18 and under using the new youth fare program will be approximately 17,000 to 34,000 in the first full year of implementation, depending on the number of daily Amtrak Cascades trains in operation.²
- Amtrak estimates that the program will cause an initial annual loss of ticket revenue ranging from \$388,000 per year to \$819,000 per year, depending on the number of daily Amtrak Cascades trains in operation. Since a youth fare program has never been implemented anywhere on Amtrak’s national network, Amtrak has cautioned WSDOT that these estimates are preliminary in nature.
- Amtrak currently collects limited passenger age data through its ticket reservations systems. Amtrak and WSDOT will continue to discuss age verification needs and associated costs for youth age verification related to ticket sales.
- Amtrak provided WSDOT with an estimated range of costs for additional staff to administer the youth fare program, including staffing levels at stations and on-board the trains. These costs are based on various levels of increased staffing under several program implementation options that are still being discussed by Amtrak and WSDOT (see list of program elements requiring further analysis below). Once Amtrak and WSDOT have identified the preferred implementation options, any costs associated with those preferred options will be provided to legislative staff and the Office of Financial Management in early 2023.

Geographic boundaries

- The youth fare program will be provided for travel between cities within the state of Washington. These 12 cities are Bellingham, Mount Vernon, Stanwood, Everett, Edmonds, Seattle, Tukwila, Tacoma, Olympia/Lacey, Centralia, Kelso/Longview and Vancouver, WA. Any youth traveling beyond these cities into Oregon or Canada will pay full youth or adult fares under Amtrak’s existing fare programs.

² Current Amtrak Cascades service levels include eight daily trains; in 2023, this may increase to 10 daily trains, depending on Amtrak staffing levels and equipment availability. Returning to full-service levels in the future will result in 14 daily trains in Washington.

Ticketing requirements

- As required by federal law, anyone riding on an Amtrak train must be listed on the train's official passenger list, known as a train manifest. Any youth riding on Amtrak Cascades will be required to have a seat reservation in advance of travel. No youth will be permitted to board a train without showing a printed ticket or seat reservation as displayed on a phone or tablet.

Incremental approach

- WSDOT and Amtrak will agree on an initial implementation approach. As the youth fare program is new, WSDOT and Amtrak will monitor performance data and may make iterative adjustments. Over time, WSDOT and Amtrak may make incremental changes to the youth fare program that incorporate lessons learned during the initial start-up phase of the program.

Implementation timing

- WSDOT anticipates the initial start-up phase of the youth fare program could be implemented on or before July 1, 2023. This timing may be impacted by decisions related to the elements requiring further analysis and modification to Amtrak systems as outlined below.

Program Elements Requiring Further Analysis

Seat reservations and inventory restrictions

- The number of seats per train for youth fare riders and the level of displacement of fare-paying passengers requires further analysis because of limited seating capacity on some Amtrak Cascades trains.
- Amtrak's reservation system is based on modified legacy airline reservation software dating from the 1960s. Modifications to these Amtrak systems are cumbersome and require linkages with web portal interfaces. Amtrak indicated it could take up to a year to modify, test, and implement reservation system modifications.

Unaccompanied minors on Amtrak Cascades

- Further analysis is needed to identify potential modifications to the Unaccompanied Minors Policy because of the youth fare program. Amtrak currently allows youth ages 13, 14, and 15 to travel between staffed Amtrak stations without an adult companion. This Unaccompanied Minors Program requires special seat reservations; identification wristbands on the young travelers; parent or guardian release and retrieval forms with signatures at both the origin and destination stations; strict supervision of these young travelers at stations and on-board by Amtrak personnel; no travel after 9:30 p.m.; and the payment of a full adult fare.

Age collection, verification and enforcement

- Amtrak age collection and enforcement methods require further analysis. Currently, travelers on Amtrak trains are asked to select an age-related category when making ticket reservations (infant, child, youth, adult, senior) for ticket pricing purposes, but ages are not verified by Amtrak personnel at stations or on-board the trains.

Schools on Trains Program

- Amtrak's Schools on Trains Program allows school groups taking field trips with adult chaperones to ride a train on a single group ticket at a discounted fare. Youth fare program implementation for Amtrak's Schools on Trains Program requires further analysis.

Public awareness/education program

- To ensure the traveling public understands the rules for using the Amtrak Cascades youth fare program, a robust public outreach and education campaign will need to be developed and provided in advance of the program's launch date and continue well after the program has become operational. Details and costs for implementation are still being developed.

Safety

- WSDOT and Amtrak are working together to analyze costs and address security concerns related to the potential for fraud, runaways and human trafficking.

Next Steps

WSDOT and Amtrak will continue to meet on a regular basis to discuss the topics addressed in this report and make the decisions necessary to achieve the goal to launch the Amtrak Cascades youth fare program by July 1, 2023. WSDOT also will continue to coordinate with ODOT on program elements that will impact ridership, revenue, and costs associated with program implementation. WSDOT and Amtrak will prioritize the development of more refined start-up and ongoing cost estimates resulting from this new youth fare program and share that data with the Legislature's transportation committees and the Office of Financial Management.

WSDOT Contact Information

Ron Pate, Director

Rail, Freight and Ports Division

360-705-6903

PateRD@wsdot.wa.gov