

ACTION ELEMENT – RAIL

Background

Historically, rail service in Butte County has been almost exclusively used to transport goods (see Chapter 12). In 1995, BCAG completed the Northern Sacramento Valley Intercity Passenger Rail study to examine the feasibility of additional passenger rail service to the region. While the study concluded that passenger rail service for the region was not yet feasible, it did provide beneficial information concerning future passenger rail service data.

Existing Rail Service

The Coast Starlight, which runs between Seattle and Los Angeles, is currently the only direct passenger rail service in Butte County (Figure 11-1). Two trains, one each northbound and southbound, stop in Chico daily. The northbound train arrives at approximately 1:55 a.m. and the southbound at 3:50 a.m. Reservations are required for travel on the Coast Starlight.

Feeder bus connections for intercity rail service are available more widely in the Butte County region. Four buses each, northbound and southbound, stop at Chico and Oroville to connect with the Capitol Corridor rail service between Sacramento and San Jose with extensions to Gilroy and Roseville, and with the San Joaquin route between Oakland and Bakersfield (Figure 11-1). Amtrak buses pick up passengers in Chico daily at 5:25 a.m., 7:55 a.m., 11:30 a.m., 2:20 p.m., and 4:05 p.m. for convenient train connections in Sacramento or Stockton. Arrivals back in Chico are at 11:59 a.m., 3:05 p.m., 6:00 p.m., 8:35 p.m., and 11 p.m. The Amtrak station is at W. 5th and Orange Streets. Parking is free. Subsequent bus connections from these routes allow travel to Reno, Yosemite, Las Vegas, Monterey, and throughout the Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco Bay urban areas. Advanced reservations are required on the San Joaquin rail and bus service but are not required on the Capitol Corridor rail service. Additional information on Amtrak and the Coast Starlight can be found at www.amtrak.com.

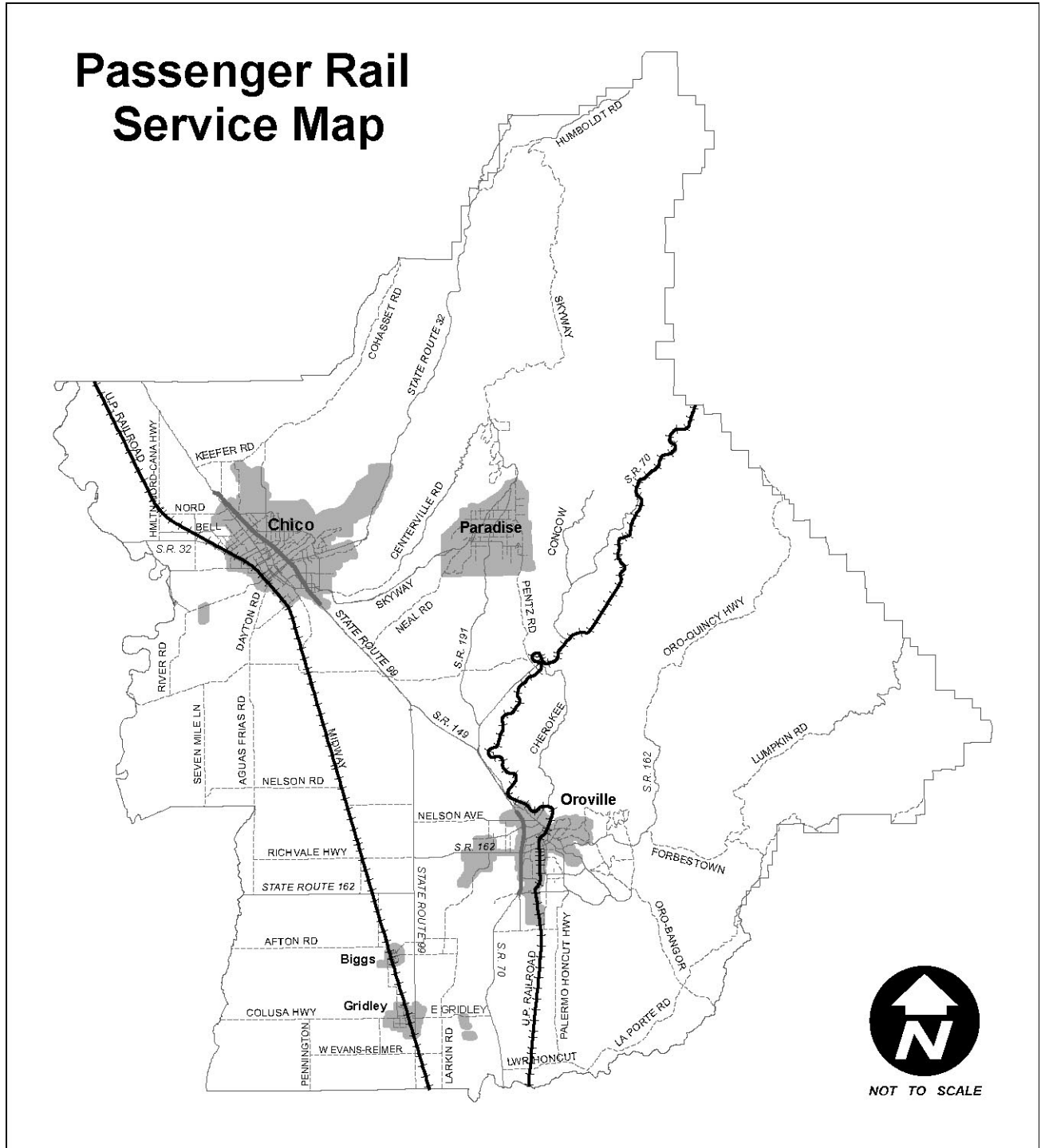
Rail Service Needs and Assessment

Intercity Rail

There are several factors that intensify the consideration of intercity rail for the Northern Sacramento Valley. First, increasing populations throughout the North Valley are taxing existing transportation systems. Second, the existing transportation systems for intercity travel are almost exclusively motorized travel for individual travelers, including carpools or buses. Third, existing intercity transportation corridors are congested, thus making intercity travel more difficult and have negative impacts on goods movement. Fourth, state and federal clean air regulations make it more and more difficult to increase roadway capacity. With the above factors making vehicular travel more difficult, alternatives must be explored.

Rail is an attractive method of travel to many. Aside from being cleaner, it is more relaxing than driving rural highways, contending with farm equipment common in the

**Figure 11-1
Passenger Rail Service Map**



valley, slow-moving trucks & recreational vehicles, and the dangers of fog and inclement weather.

The Coast Starlight is unsuitable to meet the needs of local passengers due to its infrequent and inconvenient night schedule, advanced requirement for reservations, and capacity constraints. The Coast Starlight's use of the Union Pacific tracks through Butte County demonstrates that the existing tracks can handle additional use such as passenger rail service. The key issue is whether or not sufficient ridership for intercity rail in the Northern Sacramento Valley could support the costs of the service.

During the 1994/95 fiscal year, BCAG studied the feasibility of extending intercity passenger rail service to the northern Sacramento Valley counties. ICF Kaiser of Oakland, California prepared the study, in cooperation with the counties of Sacramento, Sutter, Yuba, Butte, Placer, Tehama, and Shasta. BCAG served as the lead agency for development and coordination of the study.

The Northern Sacramento Valley Intercity Passenger Rail Study, as it was called, included two phases. The purpose of Phase I was to identify a base level rail service that could be implemented to provide intercity service, and to identify the potential ridership levels for this service. Based on the ridership forecasts, it was determined that intercity rail passenger service could not be supported currently or within the next ten-year horizon by the seven counties along the corridor. The primary reason was due to the lack of ridership necessary to recover the state required 55% operational costs through the farebox. As a result, BCAG postponed development of Phase II, which would have examined station locations, needed track improvements, financing, and institutional arrangements. While the Rail Study did not justify the need for intercity rail service now, BCAG staff will continue to participate in the rail planning process and monitor intercity rail service developments.

Northern Sacramento Valley (NSV) Passenger Rail Corridor Study

The Draft California State Rail Plan covering the period between 2007-08 to 2017-18, identifies the future preparation of the Northern Sacramento Valley (NSV) Passenger Rail Corridor Study.

While Caltrans planned the study in 2005, it was deferred due to the UP's decision not to consider operation of new passenger trains at the time. Caltrans' ten-year operating plan includes one daily round-trip between Sacramento and Redding in 2015-16 through Chico. This rail service would be supplemented by bus service that would run the same route as the train, but at different times of the day. There is no indication of when the study will be revived by Caltrans.

Grade Crossings

Another important issue concerning rail transportation in Butte County is the issue of grade crossing safety and convenience. Two cities that have problems with existing grade crossings are Gridley and Chico. Both Gridley and Chico straddle the Union Pacific railroad tracks and have at-grade crossings in several locations within their cities. Neither city has over or under-crossings. As a result of the passing trains, there are times of the day that these communities experience traffic problems where automobile traffic and emergency service vehicles are unable to access various parts of the city. Even longer delays are experienced when trains must make a stop in these cities. As a result, both the cities of Gridley and Chico have expressed a need to improve some of the intersections by constructing over or under-crossings to remedy this problem.

Currently, both Gridley and Chico are exploring a funding program administered by the Public Utilities Commission and Caltrans for grade crossing projects. The City of Chico has identified a project for West 8th Avenue, which also intersects State Route 32, while the City of Gridley has identified an over-crossing for Little Street in Gridley.

RAIL ACTION PLAN – Planned Improvements

The following “planned improvements” have been identified in terms of goals and objectives for both the short-term and long-term rail improvements. Because no specific projects can be identified at this time, the following are identified to document Butte County’s advocacy for rail improvements.

Short Range

1. Seek funding through the Public Utilities Commission’s grade Crossing Program to partially fund construction of new grade crossing improvements in the cities of Gridley and Chico.
2. Provide rail-highway crossings and protective devices at various locations to minimize rail highway conflicts.
3. Continue to support intercity rail service through the Northern Sacramento Valley, as ridership and funding allows. (*BCAG, Jurisdictions, Caltrans, Amtrak*)
4. Encourage the expansion of service on the Coast Starlight route to include a daytime stop at Chico. (*BCAG, Jurisdictions, Caltrans, Amtrak*)
5. Monitor the High Speed Rail Commission’s development of High Speed Rail System in California as it relates to Butte County.

Long Range

1. Continue to work toward implementing intercity passenger rail service through the Northern Sacramento Valley. (*BCAG, Jurisdictions, Caltrans*)
2. Provide ongoing operations and maintenance of the Coast Starlight route through Butte County. (*Caltrans, Amtrak*)
3. Continue to seek funding for construction of grade separation projects.
4. Continue monitoring other California rail activity.