

Amtrak CEO calls for public money

Wants taxes to pay for upgrades

BY SARAH KARUSH
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Amtrak's new president wants to upgrade the passenger railroad's image and the tracks it shares with the nation's increasingly busy freight rail carriers, and he expects the federal government to help.

Four months into the job, Alex Kummant said he found the much-maligned railroad in better shape than he expected. But he said it could still do a better job taking advantage of a growing appetite for rail travel fueled by high gas prices and highway congestion.

"There is a lot of good news to talk about," Kummant told

have to build the Amtrak brand for people."

Amtrak needs to work with states to expand service over medium distances and improve the long-distance trains that account for most of its losses, Kummant said. Government incentives to stimulate capital investment in the nation's nearly maxed-out rail infrastructure are also key, he said.

The government-owned corporation reported record ticket revenue of \$1.37 billion in the fiscal year ended Sept. 30, an 11 percent increase over fiscal 2005, with ridership ticking up 1 percent to 24.3 million passengers.

The system, created in 1970 to take over declining passenger rail service, is heavily dependent on government funding; it received \$1.3 billion from Congress, including a \$485 million operating subsidy,

for the 2006 fiscal year. Kummant, a 46-year-old former freight railroad and manufacturing executive, said expectations that Amtrak could be self-sufficient are misguided. He noted passenger rail is subsidized throughout the world.

There could be room to partner with the private sector, he said, but added: "You need to walk before you can run."

Amtrak supporters are hopeful the new Congress will pass legislation introduced last week by Sens. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., and Trent Lott, R-Miss., that would establish funding targets for Amtrak for the next six years.

It would also create a program of capital matching grants for states that want to invest in "corridor service" — the term Amtrak uses to describe frequently traveled

routes up to about 500 miles, such as the northeast corridor running from Boston to Washington. Currently, 14 states pay Amtrak for service.

Kummant said the shorter routes are Amtrak's real growth opportunity.

"We can offer genuine solutions to public transportation problems with that type of service," he said.

Rail service on such corridors can be competitive at 80 to 100 miles per hour, without trying to provide capital-intensive high-speed service, he said. Amtrak's fastest train, the Acela Express on the northeast corridor, reaches 150 miles per hour, but such speeds require upgraded electrical systems and tracks.

A November report by the Government Accountability Office concluded that long-distance routes — such as the Sun-set Limited from New Orleans to Los Angeles and the Empire Builder from Chicago to Seattle — account for 15 percent of riders and 80 percent of Amtrak's losses, and provide little public benefit.

Kummant said he had no intention of abandoning long-distance routes, loosely defined as those longer than 500 miles. But he said he is working with Amtrak's board of directors, made up of appointees of President Bush, to come up with a strategy that might include breaking some long routes into multiple-state corridors.



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Amtrak president Alex Kummant gestures during an interview with AP in his Washington office.

The Associated Press in an interview in his office atop Washington's Union Station. "You