



The Good Roads State turns to trains

BY MALCOLM KENTON

ABOVE: North Carolina is traversed by long-distance Amtrak trains linking the Northeast with Florida and New Orleans. In September 2008, the northbound *Silver Star* paused at Rocky Mount, N.C., on the former Atlantic Coast Line Railroad main line. ALEX MAYES

RIGHT: In recent years, NCDOT has funded Amtrak schedules serving North Carolina using state-owned equipment. Wearing colors inspired by the state flag, one of NCDOT's two F59PHI's whisks the *Piedmont* east through Durham, N.C., in July 2008. NICHOLAS D'AMATO

North Carolina becomes a model for r

Given the fact that national investment in intercity passenger rail has rarely been more than the minimum level required to keep existing long- and medium-distance trains running, and often hasn't even been sufficient for keeping Amtrak's flagship Northeast Corridor in a state of good repair, development of short-distance and corridor services outside of the Northeast Corridor has almost always depended on the investment of state governments. Most states, unlike the federal government, are constitutionally required to balance their budgets, and thus their legislatures and transportation departments are even more limited in discretionary spending. And, like the federal government, state transportation departments' primary focus has been on

building and maintaining highways. Despite these obstacles, Amtrak's management has promoted the development of short-distance corridors as a key to the railroad's future, as such services are most likely to be trip-time competitive with highway and air travel.

Only a few states have partnered with Amtrak to develop new passenger rail service, California and Illinois being oft-cited examples. However, one unlikely state, in a region known for its embrace of automobile culture, has undertaken an innovative approach to improving train service and promoting rail travel: North Carolina. The Tar Heel State is doing this in a way that respects and incorporates aspects of its railroad history. The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), long known

as the highway-building force behind the moniker "The Good Roads State," has taken increased interest in other modes in recent decades.

Formed in the 1980s, NCDOT's Rail Division is responsible for the creation, operation and maintenance of four daily Amtrak trains on two routes serving the state, the *Carolinian* and *Piedmont*. The Division has also assisted with the rehabilitation of historic train stations in 16 cities and towns, with more in the works. It has ambitious plans for future improvements, including additional station construction and renovation, more frequent service on the existing Raleigh-Charlotte corridor, restoration of service to the eastern and western parts of the state, and development of the Southeast High-Speed Rail (SEHSR) corridor in



Regional advancement in passenger rail

cooperation with Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia.

North Carolina has a long history of state involvement in railroading. The North Carolina Rail Road was constructed with state funds from Goldsboro to Charlotte in the 1850s and stood as one of the few major railroads south of the Mason-Dixon line that escaped major damage during the Civil War. In the 1880s, Governor John Motley Morehead (whose mansion still overlooks the tracks in downtown Greensboro) led the charge for state-financed railroad expansion to connect major cities. By 1900, the state had become a hub for three major north-south railroads: the Seaboard Air Line, the Atlantic Coast Line, and the Southern Railway, as well as several branch lines, with the NCRR

serving as the east-west connector between the three. At that time, nearly every city and town on a rail line had a station served by multiple daily passenger trains. But, as automobile travel became more popular and affordable and state investment led to a well-maintained network of paved highways connecting all 100 county seats, rail service dwindled and many stations disappeared.

The State of North Carolina's contemporary investment in intercity passenger rail goes back to the early 1980s. With state funding, the *Carolinian* ran between Charlotte and New York on an experimental basis in 1984 and 1985. The service was reintroduced five years later and has been running daily since. The state covers the operating expenses of the train south of Richmond, Va., the

southern terminus of much of Amtrak's Northeast Regional service. Planning for additional service within the state began in the early 1990s. Late in the decade, the State bought the remaining privately-held shares of the North Carolina Railroad Company, which still owns the original NCRR line and now leases trackage and dispatching authority to Norfolk Southern. This gave the State a better bargaining position with the freight carrier and paved the way for the infrastructure improvements necessary for speedier passenger service.

The *Piedmont*, which began service in 1995, is the only Amtrak train whose entire route is within North Carolina, plying the NCRR between Raleigh and Charlotte on a daily round trip. This route saw a whopping 53 percent gain in ridership



between the months of September and October 2008, the biggest in the Amtrak system during that time period according to a report posted by the National Association of Railroad Passengers. The *Piedmont* consists entirely of state-owned equipment. Three locomotives alternate on the service; each wears a paint scheme designed by the Rail Division's Ellen Holding, inspired by the North Carolina state flag, and each is named after a city in the state. Two are EMD F59PHIs purchased in 1998, Nos. 1755 (*City of Salisbury*) and 1797 (*City of Asheville*), and one is a rebuilt ex-Louisville & Nashville GP40H2, No. 1792 (*City of Raleigh*). Most of the passenger fleet is made up

of refurbished heritage cars built in the 1960s by Pullman-Standard and the St. Louis Car Company, originally for the Kansas City Southern and Union Pacific, respectively. Cars are painted in a special North Carolina livery featuring the state flag, and each coach is named after a different state symbol (including the *Cardinal*, *Dogwood*, and *Honey Bee*). During the service's first four years of operation, a former Milwaukee Road full-length dome was used as a lounge, but it was sidetracked in 1999.

Train 73 runs westbound every morning from Raleigh, leaving at 7AM, and arrives in Charlotte at 10:12AM. The evening return trip, train 74, departs



NCDOT Rail Division Equipment Roster

Number	Name	Type	Built for	Original No.	Builder	Built	Rebuilt	Notes
1755	<i>City of Salisbury</i>	F59PHI	NCDOT	1755	EMD	1998	2006	
1792	<i>City of Raleigh</i>	GP40H2	L&N	3006	EMD	1966	2003	
1797	<i>City of Asheville</i>	F59PHI	NCDOT	1797	EMD	1998		
400001	<i>Cardinal</i>	Coach	KCS	277	Pullman-Standard	1965	2006	66 seats
400002	<i>Dogwood</i>	Coach	KCS	274	Pullman-Standard	1965	2007	66 seats
400003	<i>Honey Bee</i>	Coach	KCS	270	Pullman-Standard	1965	2007	64 seats
400004	<i>Long Leaf Pine</i>	Coach	KCS	278	Pullman-Standard	1965	1993	66 seats
400005	<i>Scotch Bonnet</i>	Coach	KCS	279	Pullman-Standard	1965	2007	64 seats
400006	<i>Emerald</i>	Coach	UP	5530	St. Louis Car Co.	1964	2007	56 seats
400007	<i>Box Turtle</i>	Coach	UP	5538	St. Louis Car Co.	1964	2007	56 seats
400008	<i>Gray Squirrel</i>	Coach	UP	5531	St. Louis Car Co.	1964	2007	56 seats
400101	<i>Yadkin River</i>	Combine	US Army	89546	St. Louis Car Co.	1953	2006	34 seats
400201	<i>Pamlico Sound</i>	Lounge	US Army	89507	St. Louis Car Co.	1953	1995	
400202	<i>Albemarle Sound</i>	Lounge	US Army	89539	St. Louis Car Co.	1953	1997	

Source: NCDOT

Charlotte at 5:30PM and gets in to Raleigh at 8:40PM. According to Amtrak, over the last 12 months, train 73 has been punctual on about 70 percent of its runs and train 74 has achieved about 65-percent on-time performance. The typical consist is one lounge car, two or three coaches, and one combination coach and baggage car (the latter built in the 1950s for the U.S. Army). The lounge offers one complimentary snack (including chips, pretzels, candies, and granola bars) and drink per passenger (all on the honor system, as the lounge is unstaffed), and is one of a few Amtrak trains that has recycling bins for bottles, cans, and newspapers. The Rail Division has plans to replace the complimentary food with vending machines, beginning sometime in 2009, in order to increase revenue, but bottled water and coffee will remain free of charge. The *Piedmont's* combine holds checked baggage and contains bicycle racks, allowing passengers to take their bikes aboard (for a \$5 fee each), even at stations without checked baggage service, and without having to partially disassemble them in order to fit them into boxes.

The *Carolinian*, while partially financed by the Rail Division, is made



ABOVE: The southbound *Carolinian* is seen passing the historic tobacco warehouses of downtown Durham. The city once boasted a grand Union Station which served five railroads in its heyday, but it was demolished in 1968 to make way for a new road and parking garage (visible in the distance). The brick structure in the foreground is the restored Walker Warehouse, as of June 2009 the site of Durham's new Amtrak station. NICHOLAS D'AMATO

BELOW: With a lounge, three coaches and combine in tow, NCDOT F59PHI No. 1797 leads the northbound *Piedmont* across the Yadkin River near Spencer, N.C., on June 10, 2007. ALEX MAYES



up of Amtrak equipment typical of East Coast medium-distance trains, generally consisting of a Genesis P42 locomotive, a baggage car, and Amfleet-I coaches, including a Business Class car and a staffed café. It runs daily between Charlotte and New York, plying the NCR between Charlotte and Selma, where it switches to the CSX A-Line from Selma into Washington Union Station, and the Amtrak Northeast Corridor on to New York. Northbound train 80 departs Charlotte at 7:45AM, stops at Raleigh around 11AM, and arrives in New York close to 9PM. Southbound train 79 leaves New York at 7:15AM, departs Raleigh at 4:50PM and arrives in Charlotte at 8:15PM. The *Carolinian* has long suffered from poor on-time performance, particularly on the southbound run, largely due to freight congestion and dispatching practices on CSX's mainline, parts of which are single track between Petersburg, Va., and Rocky Mount. Train 79's on-time performance for much of 2008 has been an abysmal 28.7 percent, while train 80's 40.7 percent figure is only marginally better, thanks primarily to its ability to make up time in discharge-only mode north of Washington.

The scenery that passes by the windows of these trains, which generally traverse the state during daylight hours, has been described as "North Carolina's backyard," as the tracks quite literally pass behind many residents' homes. The trains glide along next to the main street in many small towns, including Mebane, Elon, Jamestown, Thomasville, and China Grove, many of which look much as they did nearly a century ago. They also cross the picturesque Yadkin and Haw rivers on high trestles. Attentive riders may glimpse what remains of the state's industrial past, including the cotton mills of Kannapolis, the furniture factories of High Point, the textile mills of Burlington and Haw River, and the tobacco warehouses of Durham, as well as the Southern Railway's former Spencer Shops, now the site of the North Carolina Transportation Museum. The Charlotte-Raleigh corridor is rapidly urbanizing, with new subdivisions and shopping malls built each year, yet passengers looking out the window still see farmland and forest for much of the ride.

A unique element of a ride on the *Piedmont* or *Carolinian* is the hospitality provided by station and train hosts. Station hosts work at depots along the route that are not staffed by Amtrak employees, and may soon be added at staffed stations to assist ticket and baggage agents. They assist passengers with making reservations over the phone or using the Quik-Trak machine, provide information about train status, give di-



ABOVE AND BELOW: Equipment used on the *Piedmont* has been thoroughly refurbished inside and out. Fresh from rebuilding in 2006, 34-seat baggage-coach *Yadkin River* was originally a U.S. Army hospital car. NCDOT's coach fleet comprises former Kansas City Southern and Union Pacific cars that were among the last to be built before Amtrak. BOTH, NCDOT

RIGHT: Partially funded by NCDOT but employing Amtrak equipment, a southbound *Carolinian* rushes toward its station stop in Durham on Aug. 8, 2008. NICHOLAS D'AMATO



rections, and point out sites of interest to tourists. Train hosts ride the entire length of the *Piedmont*, and on the *Carolinian* between Charlotte and Rocky Mount. Their main job is to be hospitable and keep passengers company, usually by swapping stories and pointing out sites along the way. Hosts also tell passengers about the on-board amenities and assist the conductor and crew.

The NCDOT Rail Division staff has been hard at work not only operating these trains, but promoting them as well. Signs posted on highways across the state announce "North Carolina Train Service," with the image of a locomotive in NCDOT colors and a link to www.bytrain.org, the Rail Division's website. Brochures about the trains are available at highway welcome centers, visitors' centers, museums, and city and regional tourism offices. Print ads appear in various local-interest magazines, including *Our State*, that proclaim "North Carolina's Amtrak: Your

Connection to Raleigh, Greensboro, Charlotte and the Northeast."

Aside from these tried-and-true advertising methods, the service's promoters have come up with other more unique methods to attract riders to the trains. In late 2006, with the help of state-level subsidies, Amtrak began offering and advertising "NC Multi Rider" tickets, each good for five or ten rides in either direction between selected cities on the *Piedmont* or *Carolinian* routes within the state at a reduced fare. This marked the first time Amtrak has offered multiple-ride tickets outside of the Northeast, Illinois, Wisconsin, and California corridor services. Additionally, since the mid-1990s, the *Carolinian* has made a special stop at the state fairgrounds just west of Raleigh during the week of the State Fair in October. This allows people from Charlotte, Greensboro, Durham, and points in between to take a day trip to the fair without having to worry about, or pay



for, parking. The train sold out on each day of the fair in 2007 and 2008. Similarly, both trains make a stop at Lexington (between High Point and Salisbury) on the last Saturday in October for the city's annual Barbecue Festival. The Rail Division also encourages people to take the *Piedmont* to Charlotte for Carolina Panthers football games. Finally, on the first Saturday in December, the Santa Train promotion brings Mr. and Mrs. Claus aboard both trains between Raleigh and Greensboro to delight passengers, pass out candy canes, and take note of children's wish lists.

The Rail Division's intensive effort to reinvigorate the state's passenger train network began in 1991. Since then, it has not only acquired and rehabilitated the locomotives and rolling stock that now make up the *Piedmont's* consists, but has also made track and grade crossing improvements across the state, reducing rail congestion and enabling faster run times for both freight and passenger

trains. It is currently working on double-tracking the NCRR between Greensboro and High Point, a key choke point as the *Carolinian* and *Piedmont* often meet there in the morning and evening. The Division's forward-thinking efforts are also guided by a philosophy that sees easily accessible and inviting stations as a key aspect of the passenger's experience. In conjunction with Amtrak and other local and state funding sources, it invested in the rehabilitation of many of the state's historic passenger stations, even some that are currently without passenger service. The state has invested a total of \$110 million to bring back to life stations that had suffered decades of neglect. These efforts earned the Division the 2007 John H. Chafee Trustees Award for Outstanding Achievement in Public Policy from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Twelve stations have been rehabilitated so far, with more in the works. "Built between the 1860s and the 1920s

and representing a wide range of architectural styles," according to a news release by the National Trust, "the stations have been given sensitive makeovers that spotlight their distinctive design features while allowing them to function efficiently in their historic role as community gateways." Cities that have benefited from station improvements include Burlington, High Point, Kannapolis, Rocky Mount, Selma, Southern Pines and Wilson, and work has been done on stations in Marion, Morganton, and Old Fort in anticipation of the re-establishment of passenger service from Salisbury west to Asheville. In addition, Amtrak and the Rail Division jointly financed the installation of a Quik-Trak ticket machine at every station in the state, except Cary and Gastonia, in 2008. Cary is expected to become a staffed station in 2009. Perhaps the most impressive overhauls of historic depots have taken place in Hamlet and Greensboro.

On June 4, 2008, Gov. Mike Eas-

ley officially announced the addition of a much-anticipated third frequency of train service on the *Piedmont* route. "As fuel prices continue to climb," Easley stated in a press release, "more and more people are turning to rail as their choice for transportation." The new trains, tentatively numbered 75 and 76, are set to begin operating in the spring of 2009 and will have consists similar to the *Piedmont*. The Rail Division is now at work acquiring and refurbishing additional Heritage equipment for use on the new run. Each train will depart its point of origin (Raleigh or Charlotte) around noon and arrive at the opposite end around 2:45PM. The primary source of funding for the startup and operational costs is a federal grant from the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program, awarded to North Carolina to address the fact that the state's air contains amounts of certain pollutants associated with the burning of fossil fuels that are consistently in excess of the maximum allowed by federal law. The grant will cover the service for three years, after which other sources will need to be tapped.

The NCDOT Rail Division has big plans in place for future expansions and improvements to passenger train service within the state. As is often the case, however, the key missing element is funding. The State of North Carolina has faced budget shortfalls for the past several fiscal years, and the state could be as much as \$1.6 billion in the red in

fiscal year 2009, according to state economists. This has put many of the Rail Division's plans on hold indefinitely. The Division's to-do list includes extending service west to Asheville through a train that would connect with the *Carolinian* and *Piedmont* at Salisbury and make intermediate stops in Statesville, Hickory, Morganton, Old Fort, and Black Mountain, among other communities, reincarnating a route operated by the Southern Railway into the mid-1970s. Preliminary work has already been done toward this end, including station rehabilitations and improvements to the line owned by Norfolk Southern. Another goal is to connect Raleigh with coastal Wilmington, either via Goldsboro and Warsaw or, more indirectly, via Fayetteville, Pembroke, and Lumberton. This extension, however, is only in the pre-planning stage, and trains are not expected to run until at least 2015.

Farther down the line, perhaps by 2020, North Carolina expects to have frequent high-speed service as far south as Charlotte over the Southeast High-Speed Rail Corridor (SEHSR). The second phase of the environmental impact study for SEHSR is under way and is expected to be completed next year. The project is a cooperative effort between the Rail Divisions of the Departments of Transportation of North Carolina and Virginia to

bring about diesel-powered high-speed trains on one of the five corridors designated by the USDOT in 1992. SEHSR will act as an extension of the Northeast Corridor, with trains operating at a maximum of 110 m.p.h. The route will follow the existing CSX line from Washington to Richmond, then follow a partially abandoned ex-Seaboard corridor from Richmond directly to Raleigh, bypassing Rocky Mount, Wilson, and Selma. It will then follow the NCRR from Raleigh to Charlotte, with future extensions to Atlanta, Macon, and Columbia.

Prospects for commuter rail service in parts of the state are also brightening. The North Carolina Railroad Co., which owns the tracks between Charlotte and Morehead City that are under long-term operating lease to Norfolk Southern, released a study in October 2008 concluding that rush-hour commuter service is possible between Greensboro and Goldsboro, including the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill Triangle area. Implementation will likely come in phases based on anticipated ridership, but if trains ran on the entire route, they would make 29 station stops in seven counties, with 18 colleges and universities within two miles of the line, according to an NCRR press release. The Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS), which currently operates one light-rail line and several bus

Hamlet

A city of around 6,000 residents located in Richmond County, Hamlet, N.C., is about two hours south-southwest of Raleigh and is served by two daily Amtrak trains: the south- and northbound *Silver Meteor* between New York and Miami (trains 91 and 92). The city was once known as the "Hub of the Seaboard," as it was the convergence of five different routes owned by the Seaboard Air Line Railroad. Now, two mainlines intersect there, both owned by CSX. Built in 1900 by the SAL, the Hamlet depot served as the railroad's division headquarters as well as a passenger station. It was built in the "Queen Anne" style once popular in railroad architecture and is the only surviving example of it in North Carolina. It features long, bracketed porches that encircle the railroad-facing sides of both stories and a circular tower at the intersection of both wings of the L-shaped building. As passenger traffic declined and CSX took advantage of centralized dispatching, the depot was vacated and boarded up, and a modular unit served as the Amtrak station. In 2001, work began on restoring the structure, funded by the Rail Division and other federal and private sources. The entire building was moved across the tracks and repositioned so that it faces east instead of south. The restored depot was dedicated in October 2004 and now houses the National Railroad Museum and Hall of Fame, operated by a group of



The magnificent Hamlet, N.C., Amtrak station, built in 1900 by the Seaboard Air Line Railroad. Between 2001 and 2004 the structure underwent an extensive renovation to restore it to its original appearance. It reopened on October 29, 2004. ALEX MAYES

retired SAL employees and featuring many artifacts from the railroad's earlier years. The upper floor, including the former division manager's office, can be rented for special events, and the room below serves as an unstaffed Amtrak waiting area. The stunning station also serves as an anchor for the continued redevelopment of the Hamlet Historic District and received an award from the Historic Preservation Society of North Carolina in 2005. A total of 4,153 Amtrak passengers boarded and detrained at Hamlet in Fiscal Year 2007.



LEFT: Raleigh's skyline serves as a backdrop for the southbound Carolinian pausing at the old Southern station on June 5, 2007. BELOW: Amtrak has outgrown the stately but cramped facilities of the SR depot; parking is limited. BOTH PHOTOS, ALEX MAYES



routes in Mecklenburg County, also has plans to construct additional rail routes between now and 2030, which will include more light rail as well as streetcars and commuter rail.

Governor Beverly Perdue, who was elected on Nov. 4, 2008, to replace the term-limited Easley, has promised to focus the state's investment on the "pillars of economic development," including transportation. Although there are no indications that there will be a major shift away from a primary focus on road construction and maintenance, Perdue has indicated support for investment in alternative modes. Two months after

the election, the 21st Century Transportation Committee, a special panel convened by the state legislature, released a list of proposed funding mechanisms for shoring up the NCDOT's coffers, including a controversial vehicle-miles-traveled tax that would be assessed at a per-mile rate based on a reading of a car's odometer at the annual state-mandated inspection. While the Committee's meetings have not involved discussions of mode-specific investments other than highways, any dedicated source of funding for the NCDOT would be a boon for rail promoters. Whether any of the Committee's proposals will pass muster with

state legislators in these lean economic times remains to be seen. Hopefully, the efforts of the Rail Division and alternative transportation advocates to enhance and promote rail travel for the past 25 years, and the increased ridership and public awareness they have generated, will translate into greater political support for future improvements. *PTJ*

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Greensboro

North Carolina's third largest city with close to 250,000 residents, Greensboro is a gateway to the South along major rail lines linking the Northeast to Atlanta, Columbia, Birmingham, and New Orleans. In 1927, the Southern Railway completed construction of the city's third passenger station, located at the end of Church Street in the heart of downtown. The station features a grand Beaux-Arts facade, a waiting room with a vaulted ceiling and hand-painted mural of the Southern Railway system as it was in the 1920s, and an adjacent Railway Express Agency office. The depot once served upward of 30 daily passenger trains in its heyday. It was, and still is, the largest passenger station in the state and one of the largest in the Southeast. By 1978, only one daily train served Greensboro (the *Southern Crescent*), and the Southern Railway donated the depot to the city. When Amtrak took over operation of the *Crescent* in 1979, the station function was moved to a small room in an office building at Pomona yard, three miles west of downtown. The old depot suffered some deterioration, but remained structurally sound and was used for some public functions and housed an elaborate model railroad layout. The Rail Division and the City of Greensboro, with federal funding assistance, made plans in 1993 to return trains to the historic station. Renovations took place in three stages. In 2003, part of the facility opened as the hub for the city's bus system and the former REA space became a Greyhound/Trailways bus station. In October 2005, Amtrak service, now consisting of six daily trains, returned to the rechristened J. Douglas Galyon Depot, named after the former Secretary of

NCDOT, a Greensboro native. The depot is a rare and shining example of a truly multi-modal transportation center, connecting city and regional bus services with long-distance buses and trains at one central location. The *Crescent* plies the Norfolk Southern mainline while the *Carolinian* and *Piedmont* use the original NCR route.—*Malcolm Kenton*



Greensboro's Southern Railway depot has been restored to its original splendor. NCDOT