

Explaining the Surface Transportation Board

Board member Deb Miller discusses functions and future of the organization regulating railroads

Surface Transportation Board member Deb Miller gave the primary address at a recent railroaders' meeting in Washington, D.C. The former Kansas transportation department secretary spoke with TRAINS' Steve Sweeney about the agency.

Q Please tell us about the STB and its functions in the 21st century.

A The STB is the economic regulator of railroads. It's our primary role. And having been at the board a little more than two years, my observations have led me to three conclusions of things I'd like to see done differently.

Everywhere you go you see people either hungering for transparency, or businesses or governmental bodies finding ways to be more transparent. And we simply are not transparent at the board.

The way we function, the chairman has the administrative responsibilities, so broadly, the staff report to the chairman and it's the chairman's job to set the agenda. I do understand why the staff overfunction, and frankly sometimes they have to. Board members' backgrounds can vary; board members come and go, and as a consequence, staff who care a lot about the place they work will kind of step forward and assume more responsibility as a way to protect

the institution. I understand those dynamics. This isn't a criticism of the staff, but I think things work better when the board is more clearly in charge and right now it's my observation that the board isn't clearly in charge.

Then I think we need to be much faster in handling the issues that are brought before us. Often times they are complex issues ... we still could change all of our processes and work much more quickly. ... Everybody is expected to do more with less and to do things much faster than we used to do them, and the board hasn't responded to that change in our society and technological change.

Q With Congress' reauthorization of the board in 2015, it added two seats to make a five-member panel. Does that change how the board may work?

A I do think having five board members argues for us changing some of our processes. Long term, we might get a great benefit from the five board members. But I'm a little concerned in the short term. We



Deb Miller

have a pretty heavy agenda already and then just adjusting to two new members and making all of that work will be taxing.

Q The reauthorization makes the board separate and independent from the U.S. Department of Transportation. Do you foresee any effects from that change?

A I think there could be some good long-term benefits for the board being separate from [DOT]. I think it will help us respond more quickly to some things. [The department] deals with our administrative side and sometimes we are slowed down on the administrative side working through [it]. In the meantime, it means that we have to take on all these administrative responsibilities that we haven't been doing. And we don't have the staff or the money to do that, so it's a concern ... that if we don't handle it as well as it could be handled it could end up creating some chaos at the agency.

Q What is your staff and budget like?

A Our annual budget is \$32 million. I don't think it's even a rounding error, it's so small. We have currently about 145 employees. I think we're authorized to go up to somewhere in the neighborhood of 156. So we're small.

>> Denver celebrates rail link to its airport



A VIP train arrives at Denver International Airport as part of the opening day celebration for Denver RTD's University of Colorado A Line on April 22. The 23-mile line to downtown, which will offer service every 15 minutes during peak hours, ends at a station under the airport's new Westin hotel. It is the

first of three routes for the new electrified commuter rail system scheduled to open this year. By this fall, a total of 36 miles will be in service. The public was offered free rides beginning at noon on opening day, bringing crowds to the transit hub at Denver Union Station (inset). Two photos, Chip Sherman