



**OPINION AND COMMENTARY** Editorials and other Opinion content offer perspectives on issues important to our community and are independent from the work of our newsroom reporters.

GUEST OPINIONS

# *Rail is growing more important to Idaho's future. Discussions will be happening soon | Opinion*

BY BRUCE AGNEW, SEN. CHUCK WINDER AND REP. BRITT RAYBOULD  
OCTOBER 03, 2024 4:00 AM



FILE - In this July 20, 2017, file photo, a Union Pacific Railroad Company employee stands on a locomotive in this file photo. (AP Photo/Nati Harnik, File) NATI HARNIK AP



Only have a minute? Listen instead

Powered by **Trinity Audio**

00:00



1.0x

05:01

Idaho is the “Gem State,” a jewel of the western Rocky Mountains and a land of immense beauty and pristine environment.

Idaho is also the “Crossroads State”.

Interstate and state highways, Class 1 and short line railroads, Columbia/Snake River waterways, commercial and general aviation airports, pipelines and electrical transmission lines crisscross the state.

Idaho corridors of transportation connect at gateways and inland seaports like the [Port of Lewiston](#) to move people, goods and energy to the Northwest region, global markets and destinations.

Railroads play a critical role.

On Oct. 8-9, representatives from federal and state agencies, elected officials, Tribal nations, railroads, ports, shippers, agriculture, tourism and passenger rail advocacy groups [will convene in Spokane](#).

The conference is hosted by the Build NW Council of the [Pacific Northwest Economic Region](#) (PNWER) and [All Aboard Northwest](#).

Idaho has been a longtime leader in PNWER with president pro tem of the Idaho Senate Chuck Winder recently serving as PNWER president. PNWER's State Council is led by Lt. Gov. Scott Bedke and Ken Dey of Simplot. Many Idaho legislators have graduated from PNWER's Legislative Energy Horizon Institute (LEHI) – a boot camp on all things energy.

The theme of this year's conference will be “High Performance Rail”. The idea is to find opportunities to mix public and private investments in rail networks to better move Idaho products and people while enhancing community access and safety. It starts with understanding why railroads are so critical to our economy and environment.

As we wait at a rail crossing for a long train passing or wake to their whistle at night, we may not appreciate that rail moves one ton of freight 470 miles on a

gallon of fuel. One train can carry the freight of hundreds of trucks, reducing greenhouse gasses and highway congestion.

Those trains are also fast-forwarding products from Idaho farms and local businesses to global markets reducing consumer costs. Savage – a Utah-based global supply chain company – is accomplishing this by truck and rail transloading at their [Pocatello Intermodal Facility](#). They fill containers with agricultural products and other commodities bringing them closer and faster to worldwide marine shipping lines at the Northwest Seaport Alliance at the ports of Seattle and Tacoma. Savage is also training a skilled workforce and expanding southeast Idaho's manufacturing base.

High Performance Rail leverages the massive federal infrastructure investment from the Bi-Partisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) passed by Congress. The law is bringing billions to Idaho in new funding for highways, bridges, transit, airport, highway/rail intersection safety and long-distance Amtrak expansion.

Idaho's Transportation Department and BNSF Railway received funding for a safety project on State Highway 53 to consolidate highway crossings and separate traffic through a new overpass at Hauser, Idaho. This will reduce local traffic delays and enhance emergency response on the busy rail corridor in the fast growing Spokane to Sandpoint region

Major expansion of Amtrak's national long-distance train network could bring many more trains to the Sandpoint with new [North Coast Corridor](#) service on the Seattle to Chicago route serving southern Montana. The Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority has received a federal endorsement and funding for the route. The new route will complement the existing Amtrak Empire Builder on the HiLine.

More buses and trains with greatly restored historic train stations serving as a catalyst for housing, education and employment centers is the hallmark of High Performance Rail in southern Idaho. [Valley Regional Transit](#) is connecting communities in Treasure Valley by accelerating private capital investment in public transit stations as it expands bus service. Valley Regional Transit is led by our project partner Elaine Clegg, who was recently nominated to serve on the

Amtrak Board of Directors for her demonstrable leadership and dedication to advancing transportation solutions for southern Idaho and the greater region.

A [Bring Back Rail](#) campaign seeks to restore the Amtrak Pioneer service which served Boise from 1977 to 1997 by tapping into the \$60 billion BIL funding for passenger rail nationwide.

The route is designated in the Amtrak Long Distance Study to connect Washington, Oregon and southern Idaho communities with Salt Lake City. Leading the federal initiative is the City of Boise and Idaho Transportation Department. Restored passenger rail service will provide more transportation options for rural residents and Tribal members to jobs, education and health care while increasing tourism and access to state and national parks and recreation.

Idaho is indeed at a crossroads.

*Bruce Agnew is the director of the Pacific Northwest Economic Region Regional Infrastructure Accelerator. Chuck Winder is the president pro tempore of the Idaho Senate. Britt Raybould is a state representative serving Idaho's 34th District.*

## Take Us With You

Real-time updates and all local stories you want right in the palm of your hand.



IDAHO STATESMAN APP →

VIEW NEWSLETTERS →

### SUBSCRIPTIONS

[Start a Subscription](#)

[Customer Service](#)

[Edition](#)

### LEARN MORE

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Newsletters](#)

### ADVERTISING

[McClatchy Advertising](#)

[Place an Ad](#)

[Place a Classified Ad](#)