MAP OF THE MONTH

West Coast passenger trains

VANCOUVER

AMTRAK

From Vancouver to San Diego, a revolution has occurred. Let someone else sit in traffic!

What you're seeing here is a transformation that's nothing short of remarkable.

Twenty years ago, a map of West Coast short-haul passenger trains would've been little more than a blank page. Back then, Amtrak provided minimal service between Oakland and Bakersfield, Calif., and between Portland and Seattle, though it did field 14 San Diegans a day to and from Los Angeles. The only commuter trains, San Jose to San Francisco, a service dating from 1864, were kept running with state money.

These maps chart the 338 weekday commuter and intercity passenger trains that today serve West Coast cities from San Diego to Vancouver, B.C. The network totals 1,734 route-miles! Train counts (revenue moves only) are from public timetables in effect in December 2006.

Omitted from the tabulations are six overnight trains operated by Amtrak and VIA Rail Canada, although they do extend the network to riders beyond the corridors and in some cases supplement Amtrak's intercity service. (For example, the Coast Starlight's morning departures provide an extra frequency southbound from Seattle to Eugene, Ore., and northbound from Los Angeles to San Luis Obispo, Calif.) Also omitted is VIA's now-suspended Vancouver Island service, a single daily round trip made with Rail Diesel Cars.

While 300 trains may seem like a drop in the bucket compared with the 3,000 commuter trains that run in the Northeast [see the July 2005 TRAINS "Map of the Month"], the rise of the West Coast passenger train has been a success story for a region in love with its cars. Of course, it was intolerable highway congestion that prompted Western states to look to the passenger train as an alternative. It took vision and leadership from politicians and public administrators at the state and county level to get the trains going - and a commitment from citizens, who voted "yes" to bond issues, gasoline and sales tax hikes, and clean-air legislation that included funding for passenger rail.

Like flowers blooming in the desert, new services appeared: Amtrak's Capitol Corridor in 1991; Los Angeles' Metrolink in 1992; San Diego's Coaster and Vancouver's West Coast Express in 1995; San Jose's Altamont Commuter Express in 1998; and Seattle's Sounder in 2000.

Established services, meanwhile, added departures and introduced sharp-looking new equipment, thanks to a commitment

CASCADES **VANCOUVER** AREA from Amtrak and its state sponsors, and the local agencies that manage commuter

In 1995, Amtrak extended intercity trains north of L.A. to San Luis Obispo; south of Portland to Eugene, Ore.; and north of Seattle to Vancouver, B.C. Metrolink added lines to Riverside in 1993, Oceanside in 1994, a San Bernardino-Oceanside route in 1995, and a Riverside-Fullerton-L.A. service in 2002, while extending the reach of its three original lines. In 2003, Sounder began running north of Seattle. Caltrain, under the management of a tri-county agency, pushed south to Gilroy in 1992 and rebuilt its railroad to launch the "Baby Bullet" express trains in 2004.

services and the Capitol Corridor.

In the mid-2000s, the Pacific Surfliner was Amtrak's second-busiest route, carrying 2.6 million riders in 2006, and the Capitol Corridor was third, with 1.2 million riders. Metrolink and Caltrain each moved about 10 million riders in 2006.

If there's a downside to all this expansion, it's that many of the passenger routes are owned by freight railroads, whose traffic has also grown sharply. Millions of dollars in Amtrak, state, and local money has paid for capacity improvements and more passenger-train slots. Still, on-time performance suffers on some busy routes, and without expensive investments, some lines won't come close to matching the train frequencies found in Chicago and the East.

Then again, the East could learn a thing or two from the trains out West. Along the Pacific, lifestyle matters, and passengertrain amenities such as big windows, WiFi service, bike racks, water fountains, and most important! — cup-holders will be a welcome surprise to anyone who has ever jammed onto an East Coast commuter train or tried squinting through the gunbarrel slits of an Amfleet coach window.

After all, highway congestion and gas prices may be the catalyst that gets riders on board the trains, but it's the inviting equipment and convenient service that will keep them there. — Matt Van Hattem

