

Amtrak to let guns be checked

THEY CAN RIDE UNLOADED IN BAGGAGE HOLDS

BY TONY BIZJAK
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Reversing a near decade-long ban, Amtrak will allow passengers to bring guns on most trains starting next month, including several that stop in Sacramento.

The change, pushed by gun rights advocates and ordered by Congress, aligns Amtrak's firearms policy with air travel rules that allow unloaded guns to be stored in locked baggage holds.

Federal Homeland Security officials on Monday said they are OK with guns being on trains as long as security protocols are enforced.

"It's deemed safe and appropriate," federal Transportation Security Administration spokesman Nico Melendez said. "If people follow the rules, it's pretty simple."

Under the policy, beginning Dec. 15, guns can be brought aboard trains that have checked baggage service. Gun owners must inform Amtrak officials 24 hours ahead of departure. Unloaded firearms must be packed in hard-sided containers and will be stored in train lockers.

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Amtrak: Train cars being retrofitted for gun storage

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The gun allowance applies to most Amtrak trains, including the San Joaquin service connecting Sacramento to Oakland and the Central Valley. However, the gun ban remains in place on Capitol Corridor trains, which connect Auburn, Sacramento and Davis with the Bay Area, but don't have checked baggage service.

Amtrak officials said the federally funded train system is retrofitting train cars for gun storage, but said they have no idea how many people will travel with firearms.

The policy change was pushed by the National Rifle Association and U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., who called it a victory for people who want to carry firearms for sport or own them for safety.

"We worked hard for this," NRA spokesman Andrew Arulanandam said. "It is reasonable for law-abiding people who wish to travel with firearms to be able to do so."

Daniel Vice of the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence countered that the rule change makes it easier for terrorists to bring weapons on trains with intent to do harm. He said his group and Amtrak police are pleased, however, to have won concessions requiring locked storage and 24-hour advance notice.

Passengers at the Sacramento Amtrak station Monday mainly shrugged at news of the policy.

"We worked hard for this. It is reasonable for law-abiding people who wish to travel with firearms to be able to do so."

ANDREW ARULANANDAM,
*National Rifle Association
spokesman*

"I have no issue with that as long as it's done in a safe way," traveler Kim Jording of Iowa said. "There are a lot of people who hunt or who are moving and taking their possessions with them."

The gun ban was one of the few areas where post-9/11 security has been tighter on trains than planes.

While fliers endure tough controls, including body scan machines and controversial pat-down searches, train riders still board without passing through metal detectors or having their luggage screened.

Most rail travelers say they'd like to see more security on trains, but not the checkpoints that irritate air travelers.

Train traveler Margo Hagaman of Albany, N.Y., passing through Sacramento on Monday, called airport security checkpoints "a nuisance."

"I can see more of a need to do that on

planes because of the danger we've seen on planes. At this point (on trains), no."

Federal security officials say there hasn't been a serious train terrorism incident in the post-9/11 era in the United States. But they point to terrorist bombings on London and Madrid trains to explain why the federal government lately has stepped up spending on rail safety.

That includes funding for Visual Intermodal Protection and Response teams, one of which was highly visible strolling the Sacramento station and platforms Monday. Officers with bomb-sniffing dogs also patrolled Amtrak trains during the Thanksgiving weekend.

"There were three of them walking up and down the train with a dog last night," said Bob Tidball of his ride from Seattle to Sacramento. "I think that's a positive sign."

"They seem to be doing it more than in the past," Amtrak spokeswoman Vernae Graham said. "We welcome it."

Several passengers said such teams are unlikely to stop someone who chooses to blow up tracks or a train bridge.

"You can hit a train and never get on the train," rider Daryl Terrell of Maryland said.

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CALTRANS

Lane link-ups face tougher scrutiny

IS IT ACTUALLY AN EXPANSION OF FREEWAYS?

By TONY BIZJAK
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Caltrans has been lining Sacramento-area freeways for more than a decade with unusual new lanes - short-distance tracks that run from an onramp to the next offramp.

They're called "auxiliary" lanes, and highway engineers love them. The California Department of Transportation sees them as an inexpensive way to reduce congestion at freeway merge points. Another plus: They're not considered major freeway expansions, so Caltrans often doesn't have to do extensive environmental studies to get them built.

Now, however, the state highway agency is laying plans to push the program into potentially

controversial territory.

Caltrans wants to link several auxiliary lanes on Interstate 80 in Roseville and create similar link-ups on Highway 99 in south Sacramento. The result would be three- and four-mile freeway sections, each running past several interchanges.

The plan has prompted debate among transportation planners who wonder: Are the linked auxiliary lanes really regular freeway lanes in disguise?

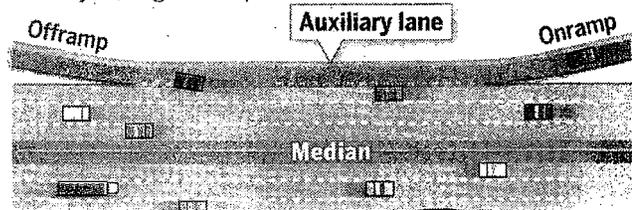
Sacramento Area Council of Governments officials are pushing for Caltrans to more fully and publicly air its plans.

"Our goal is to accurately describe what exactly these projects are, so everybody understands," said SACOG's Mike McKeever. "If some of these are not what a normal person would say is an auxiliary lane, let's make it clear what that is."

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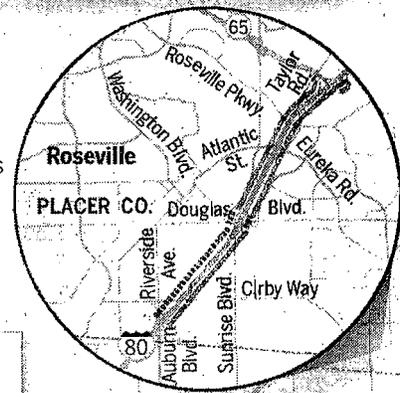
WHAT IS AN "AUXI" LANE?

- Auxiliary lanes typically begin at an onramp and end at the next offramp, without passing through any interchanges in-between.
- Traffic engineers say they make freeway merging faster and safer, reducing congestion.
- Some drivers use them like a local road, ducking in and out of freeways during short trips.



Roseville I-80

Caltrans is planning to build a connection between auxiliary lanes in the notorious Roseville bottleneck area to create a four-mile merge lane.



KEY

Existing auxiliary lane

Planned auxiliary lane

Lanes: Caltrans touts time, fuel savings

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His agency is tasked with measuring vehicle emissions caused by transportation projects and reporting the results to the federal government.

Sacramento is under closer federal scrutiny because it is a federal clean air non-attainment area. The region can qualify for federal funds to build regular freeway lanes but first must show it has reviewed other possibilities, such as rail lines and express buses.

Caltrans officials could not be reached for comment Friday on what alternatives the department has studied. In an e-mail to The Bee, the agency said it had conducted environmental analyses for both projects.

McKeever, of SACOG, said Caltrans' expansion of its auxiliary lanes into longer stretches may prompt extra federal review, but he doesn't believe it will jeopardize federal funding for the region.

Federal Highway Administration officials declined comment, but a spokesman said his agency knows highway departments nationally are struggling with limited budgets and trying new approaches to help traffic flow smoothly.

"We look forward to continued work with the SACOG and Caltrans on creative ways to balance congestion relief with environmental sensitivity," federal highways spokesman Doug Hecox said in an e-mail Friday.

Caltrans trumpets its auxiliary lane program as a boon to drivers, saying it reduces commute times by allowing vehicles to travel more often at optimum fuel-efficient speeds.

"People can merge with more space and time, and less conflicts with people exiting the freeway," said Caltrans' Sacramento-area planning head Jeff Pulverman.

Auxiliary lanes have proved popular. When Caltrans and Placer County teamed up to build an auxiliary lane in the infamous I-80 Roseville bottleneck several years ago, commuters cheered.

"It's like it busted everything loose," Caltrans spokesman Mark Dinger said.

By the time the latest set of auxiliary lanes is finished on Highway 50, Caltrans will have flanked more than half of Sacramento's core freeways with auxiliary lanes. Highway officials say taking the next step by connecting some auxiliary lanes in congested areas like I-80 in Roseville and Highway 99 in south Sacramento and Elk Grove will allow the lanes to do a better job of congestion relief.

The agency also has looked at linking auxiliary lanes on Highway 50 at the Sacramento-El Dorado County line.

Other Caltrans projects, notably carpool lanes, have faced legal challenges by groups that argue the lanes diminish air quality, encourage longer commutes and lead to more growth in rural areas. But auxiliary lanes so far have flown under the radar. Because they're short, they haven't been considered inducements for drivers to travel longer distances.

Mike McCoy, director of the Urban Land Use and Transportation Center at the University of California, Davis, said auxiliary lanes often do bring air quality improvements.

It can depend on local land-use policies, he said. If cities and counties see freeway lane additions as an invitation to build shopping centers and subdivisions in undeveloped areas, "you are going to fill (lanes) right back up, and we are back where we started."

SACOG says auxiliary lanes offer drivers alternative routes for short trips. Instead of wending through stop-and-go street traffic, they can use auxiliary lanes.

"Looking at the entire region's travel demand, that's a benefit," said SACOG's director of research and analysis, Gordon Garry. "It's making the best of the facilities we have."

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