

## A Green Bay Passenger Rail History

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At the creation of the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, more commonly known as Amtrak in 1971, the passenger rail connections between Green Bay and Milwaukee were suffering like most intercity passenger routes of the day. Just 20-25 years earlier this route was considered by some to be one of the most heavily used passenger rail services in the region.

Anecdotally it has been suggested that had the Wisconsin-Illinois State line been north of Milwaukee, Amtrak would have taken over the route. However, it was regarded as an *Intrastate* route, not an *Interstate* route. In 1971 outward appearances were the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) was only interested in concrete, for freeways and highways.

### Green Bay Train Stations *numerous options after WWII*

The only passenger station remaining in Green Bay in 2022 was constructed by the Chicago & North Western Railway and opened in 1899. Arguably the most popular train was the Flambeau 400 traveling between Chicago and Ashland, WI. Regular passenger service ended in 1971. In 1996 the C&NW station was purchased by Titledown Brewery and remains in business to this day.

A 1939 C&NW Passenger Train schedule shows two different routes were utilized: a west of Lake Winnebago route through Fond du Lac and Oshkosh with five trains per day, and a second route along the Lake Michigan shoreline for four trains per day. This Pre-World War II scheduling obviously reflects a much different traveling community in eastern Wisconsin.

The Milwaukee Road also had a downtown station on the east side of the Fox River competing with the C&NW. But the Milwaukee Road ceased passenger operations 15 years earlier than C&NW. In 1957 their station was donated to the City of Green Bay and in 1986 it was sold to the Chamber of Commerce. Another railroad in town, the Green Bay & Western Railroad, an east to west line, ceased passenger operations in 1949.

A 1952 Milwaukee Road timetable shows two trains daily visiting Green Bay traveling on the east side of Lake Winnebago, stopping in towns like Plymouth, Elkhart Lake, Chilton and more. One of the trains each direction had an overnight scheduling with the southbound leaving Green Bay at 1:05am.

The Soo Line also had passenger train service for much of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it did not stop in Green Bay. The Laker service started in Chicago with stops in Milwaukee and Waukesha, then traveling north on the current Canadian National mainline with stops in Fond du Lac, Oshkosh and Neenah. From there The Laker veered northwest towards Waupaca and Stevens Point. A 1958 Soo Line timetable shows two daily trains, including a northbound that left Chicago at 12:45am and a southbound that left Neenah at 3:00am.

### Amtrak Era Begins *no passenger trains on either side of Lake Winnebago*

Reports from the 1960s indicate the size of all passenger trains along the routes leading to Green Bay were diminishing in size as the general public was finding other modes of transportation for their needs. Amtrak had no interest in serving the Fox Valley leading to Green Bay.

In subsequent years after 1971 passenger rail advocates including Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers (WisARP) maintained an interest in reinstatement and had several studies created. A Milwaukee to Green Bay passenger train has always been in the Wisconsin State Rail Plan, but most everyone will remember in 2009 &

2010 WisDOT was promoting the Milwaukee to Madison extension with a lavish federal funding offer. Even then, the WisDOT Rail Plan Included Green Bay to Milwaukee as a medium-term plan.

The WisDOT 2008 plan was for a \$700 million-plus project that involved reinstalling 25 miles of track between West Bend and Eden. This corridor was converted to a rail-trail and in 2006 it debuted as the Eisenbahn Trail. The 2008 plan also included new depots despite limited service. It can be charitably described as a gold-plated proposal with an implementation schedule finishing in 2017. It died before it really got started.

### NEWRails is Born

A small group in Green Bay got together to promote rail travel in general and offer an alternative to several WisDOT Passenger Rail proposals. It was known as NEWRails.

The ongoing alternative proposal suggests the Canadian Pacific west out of Milwaukee and at Duplainville connecting to the Canadian National going north as an alternative to the West Bend construction. The Wisconsin state owned corridor used by Wisconsin & Southern Railroad running through the north side of Milwaukee to Slinger is a later improvement and is also supported.

NEWRails also supports the use of DMUs (\*) to allow service to smaller communities. Our proposal is a train of two 2-car DMUs would leave Milwaukee after connecting with a Milwaukee- Chicago Hiawatha train. The train would stop at a new depot in northern Milwaukee County, Fond du Lac, and Oshkosh. In Oshkosh the train would divide. The front DMU would run express to Appleton and Green Bay. The rear would take the same route stopping at Neenah/Menasha, Appleton, Kaukauna, Wrightstown, De Pere, and Green Bay. On select days this train could stop near Lambeau Field. Southbound trains would be the reverse. DMUs allow service to smaller markets and could gain additional support from these communities.

The emphasis on using existing infrastructure allows promotion of “service first” with incremental improvement as demand increases. The projected cost of the NEWRails proposal was \$125 - \$150 million in 2010.

In 2010 this proposal received extensive coverage in the Green Bay Press Gazette and their affiliates ahead of a public meeting. The expectation for the meeting, held at the Depot Restaurant in Green Bay, was for 10-20 people in attendance. With a crush of over 100 people wishing to attend, a second meeting had to be quickly organized.

Although NEWRails can be characterized as an organization a mile wide and a millimeter deep, it was able to have some basic organization. It had a website and an email list 200 strong. NEWRails made presentations to a number of mayors and city councils up and down the Valley and received a positive response.

After the November 2010 election won by Governor-elect Scott Walker and the killing of the Madison Extension proposal, NEWRails withered and became a dormant organization for the rest of the 2010s.

**(\*) DMU or Diesel Multiple Unit, is a passenger rail car, or light rail passenger car, that also contains the locomotive that powers the train. This is considered a more economical operation compared to a separate diesel engine powering passenger cars. See more at Wikipedia. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diesel\\_multiple\\_unit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diesel_multiple_unit)**

### Amtrak Bus Connects

Bus service offered by numerous carriers has existed for decades connecting Green Bay and Milwaukee, and a few of the buses even stopped at the Milwaukee Airport Amtrak Station connecting to the Milwaukee to Chicago Amtrak Hiawatha trains.

In 2019 when the bus options dwindled to an unacceptable few, Amtrak and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation organized an Amtrak sponsored, twice daily bus service directly connecting to the Hiawatha at

the Milwaukee General Mitchell Airport station. In 2020 the pandemic forced a suspension of service, but in 2022 the Amtrak sponsored service has returned to twice daily bus service.

Amtrak continues to advertise a \$39 ticket one-way from Green Bay to Chicago, which is the mixed service of bus and train service. The Amtrak booking site does list the other bus carrier options, but all are at a higher ticket price than the Amtrak sponsored service.

It is worth noting the Amtrak Bus service does stop at DePere and Wittman Airport in Oshkosh. These stops are not currently proposed on a Green Bay Extension train.

### Amtrak Connect Us!

The Amtrak proposal in 2021 for Fox Valley / Green Bay service took most by surprise. The reaction was mostly positive, except for Republican legislators in State Government and Congress. The Federal Railroad Administration came out with a Midwest Railroad Plan that included an extension to Green Bay, as did the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC). But the Amtrak Connect Us plan gained the most attention.

Politically, the 2021 proposal has gained the support of numerous municipal leaders. Green Bay Mayor Eric Genrich has offered his office as the host of municipal leaders who support the proposal. NEWRails believes municipal and county leaders are key to the support of the train and hope they will join Mayor Genrich's lead. The NEWRails leaders Frank Ingram and Larry Rueff hope to gain strong support from all Chambers of Commerce along this route in hopes that state legislators would become more independent and interested in supporting this extension train.

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