

# TCMC NEWSLETTER



Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers

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August 29, 2022

## TCMC SUMMER 2022 UPDATE

For some people the month of August represent the last month of summer. But for the TCMC train it continues to be the summer of hope and early opportunity.

After a spring season full of good news over the implementation of the TCMC train, headline grabbing announcements over the progress of the TCMC train have quieted this summer. That doesn't mean behind-the-scenes progress has stopped.

### CANADIAN PACIFIC ACQUISITION

The *EARLY OPPORTUNITY* is the chance that a three day per week TCMC train might get started in the first quarter of 2023. This opportunity was announced in the spring of 2022 and has continued to be talked up through this summer by a variety of sources. There is little doubt that this opportunity is a result of the Canadian Pacific Railroad's intention of merging with the Kansas City Southern Railroad.

The *HOPE* in this opportunity is that the Canadian Pacific will make good on its promise to allow the TCMC train to begin daily revenue service before the construction projects agreed upon to their railroad infrastructure are performed. The only construction project within the State of Wisconsin is the restoration of a boarding track at the La Crosse station. This will allow passenger trains to exit the single main line track while passengers board

and detrain either the TCMC or the Empire Builder. This will allow Canadian Pacific to use the boarding track as a passing siding, allowing through freight trains to pass by

the stopped Amtrak train.



The Empire Builder has a NEW operating schedule

See Page Two for details

### EMPIRE BUILDER vs COVID

Many national medias have been displaying news about how passenger train and light rail have had significantly fewer passengers since the onset of COVID-19 in 2020. Most of the damage to ridership numbers have been in the larger urban areas where the services are used by daily commuters.

Although long distance trains were also affected by the onset of COVID, their losses have not been as severe as their urban / commuter counterparts.

Move forward to spring and summer 2022, and Amtrak's Empire Builder appears to be strutting it's previously perceived muscle as the greatest of all of Amtrak's long-distance trains, carrying full capacity trains again with minimal COVID restrictions. *(Continued on page two)*



# NEW EMPIRE BUILDER SCHEDULE

Effective Monday, July 11, 2022, the Empire Builder schedule changed after untold decades of no change to the iconic passenger train.

The impetus for change is the recently implemented on-time performance standard by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). If you've followed the on-time charts in the TCMC Newsletters you'll know the westbound Empire Builder from Chicago to St. Paul, MN. was on average a tick below 70 percent at 20 minutes. The new FRA on-time standard is 80 percent at 15 minutes. The eastbound Empire Builder has been such an on-time mess this century.

The biggest disappointment for most in Wisconsin is the westbound #7 doesn't leave Chicago now until 3:05pm. That's 50 minutes later than previous timetables. There has been no explanation from Amtrak over this change, which would appear to not be affected by the new FRA regulations.

The net result in these changes could add hours to the schedule for riders going something close to end-to-end. For riders using the Empire Builder as a regional train with stops between the Twin Cities and Milwaukee or Chicago, it's more of a shift in the posted schedule time.

## EMPIRE BUILDER SCHEDULE

For Wisconsin  
Effective July 2022

### 7/27 westbound

	<u>departs</u>
Chicago Union Station	3:05p
Milwaukee Intermodal	4:45p
Columbus	5:55p
Portage	6:24p
Wisconsin Dells	6:42p
Tomah	7:20p
LaCrosse	8:04p
Winona, MN	8:40p
St. Paul, MN	arrives 10:56p

### 8/28 eastbound

	<u>departs</u>
St. Paul, MN	d 8:50a
Winona, MN	11:01a
LaCrosse	11:37a
Tomah	12:16p
Wisconsin Dells	12:58p
Portage	1:17p
Columbus	1:47p
Milwaukee (departs)	2:57p
Chicago Union Station	4:45p

## EMPIRE BUILDER vs COVID?

(Continued from page one)

With gasoline prices around \$5 per gallon at the beginning of the summer driving season, there might have been additional reasons for travelers to look to Amtrak to get around. Official Amtrak ridership numbers won't be available until the end of the year or possibly January 2023.

If we look back at the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) (see CRISI note one) application that was submitted in June of 2020, we find plenty of information that still applies today regarding that train rider, who that will be and why they will desire to ride this train. (Continued on page three)

## What is the TCMC train?

The acronym is derived from the endpoints with Milwaukee in the center: Twin Cities- Milwaukee- Chicago. The TCMC project will add one daily round-trip regional train between these cities and serve all current Empire Builder stations in-between. The TCMC service will be considered a regional passenger rail corridor (as opposed to Amtrak long-distance) because it is under the 750 mile-standard set by the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008. This train will be state supported like the Milwaukee-Chicago Hiawatha trains. The cost of the TCMC Train will be split between the three state sponsors: Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

**For more detailed information about any of WisARP's Newsletters this year, head to the WisARP website:**  
[www.wisarp.info](http://www.wisarp.info)



## TCMC NEWS

Is created and written by Terry Brown, Vice President- Public Relations for WisARP and is solely responsible for its content.

## What does this mean for the TCMC?

*(Continued from page two)*

It is a reasonably well-known fact that roughly 70% of all Amtrak long distance train travelers are regional travelers. They are taking advantage of the long-distance train to travel distances less than 750 miles.

The CRISI application clearly states a strong majority of Empire Builder passengers are traveling for either personal or leisure reasons. These travelers are possibly willing to deal with some scheduling inefficiencies. A business traveler is likely not going to accept scheduling delays. Therefore, it is highly likely that at least to start the TCMC train will have roughly the same mix of personal versus business travelers.



There are opportunities within the State of Wisconsin for the TCMC train to excel. Some of these opportunities may be largely unknown to us right now. Some of these opportunities are begging for attention.

One example that could result in explosive ridership growth would be the relationship of the TCMC train and the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse student population. The Great River Rail Commission with an assist from the City of Winona (MN) did an excellent job in their lobbying at the Minnesota State Capitol reporting how well students at Winona State University and St. Mary's University in Winona utilize the Empire Builder service, particularly on weekends. UW-L to this point does not appear to encourage students to utilize train travel outside of the City of La Crosse.

How many UW-L students would utilize an eastbound train towards Milwaukee if it went through La Crosse scheduled during the afternoon? (Not erratically and unpredictably late in the afternoon.) How many UW-L

students would utilize a westbound train towards the Twin Cities if they would have a scheduled return train in early afternoon instead of scheduled early morning? What could the benefits be if the UW-L U-PASS ticket offered a timely shuttle to the La Crosse depot for train connections? And a shuttle bringing students to campus after a train arrival?

## WILL TCMC BE READY IN 2023?

Believe it or not, and I almost regret saying this, Supply Chain issues might have a larger impact on when the TCMC train will begin running compared to any other issue you can think of. These other issues could be administrative, such as hammering out the final details of the state supported contracts. Other issues could be passenger car equipment, and the availability of roadworthy cars at 79 MPH. Or Amtrak employees to staff these cars completely. (You are reading an abridged version of this story. The full story is available for download at [WisARP.info](http://WisARP.info).)

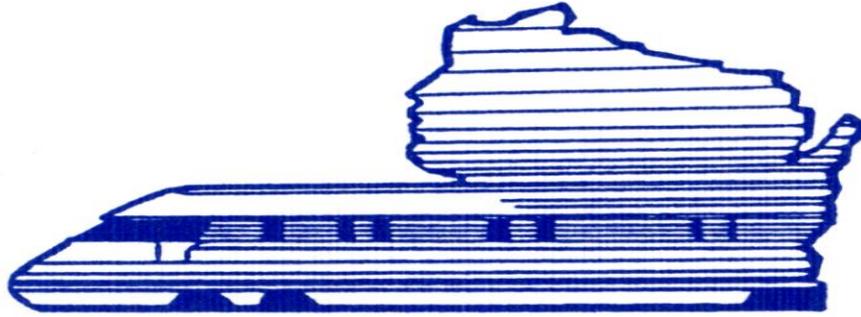
## PICTURES IN THIS ISSUE

The top picture on page one is from Winona Station October 2020. Significant COVID lock downs were still in place, yet between 24-30 riders boarded the Empire Builder this fall morning. This picture by Terry Brown

An interesting question would be when Amtrak begins replacing the aged bi-level Superliner cars, will the new rolling stock more resemble the traditional single-level streamlined cars of the past?

The picture on this page is the Amtrak Hiawatha shot on July 10, 2022, near Franksville, WI. by Alan Baker. Looks can be deceiving. There are only three revenue coaches on this train. The odd-looking car is just for delivering Wi-Fi to the coach cars. Sometimes called a Table Car, it may open for passengers during rush hour times only.

Reminder: All Hiawatha seats are currently reserved with your ticket. Walk-on seating is not available.



## Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers (WisARP) **New member sign-up form 2022**

Since 1977, WisARP has been the voice of the rail passenger in Wisconsin. Our strength is in the size of our membership. A one-year trial WisARP membership is just \$5. Besides our quarterly newsletter Badger Rails, WisARP also has email groups to provide members with the latest news.

It has been over 10 years since the Walker administration turned back federal money that WisDOT had applied for to continue development of the Madison Extension. But the work of WisARP has continued. We are still focused on:

**(1) You are seeing this New Member Sign-Up sheet in a newsletter keeping Wisconsin citizens informed over developments of the second train on the current Empire Builder route between the Twin Cities and Chicago (called the TCMC train.). Funding has been secured, but our education efforts continue.**

(2) Educating the public on the usefulness of the Hiawatha service in a post-Pandemic/ Endemic era, and

(3) Creation and Implementation of the Hiawatha Extension trains to Green Bay and Madison.

If you would like to join WisARP for the journey ahead, it is simple. Just fill out the form below. Your first year (2022) is \$5 with this special TCMC Newsletter form! Just \$10 per year afterwards.

Jim Sponholz, WisARP VP-Membership- August 2022

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ Cell Phone \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

*Please add your email address below to receive the latest WisARP news including Badger Rails.*

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Mail To: WisARP Memberships  
4230 N. Oakland Ave, Box 259  
Shorewood, WI 53211-2042