

## **TCMC SUMMER 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.

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 on 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.

### **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. Reports from the field indicated April and May 2020 were grim days for all long-distance services with many virtually empty trains. Late 2020 Amtrak reduced the long-distance trains to three days per week, which obviously constricted these trains capability for riders.

By late spring 2021 there was growing pressure on Amtrak to restore daily service. The three day per week train arrangement was beginning to report sold out trains and a greater desire for the rural American public to ride Amtrak again, regardless of COVID restrictions. Riders were selling out the sleeper accommodations for COVID privacy regardless of cost or length of trip. When Amtrak restored daily service in June 2021, riders or potential riders were still requesting more seats than were available.

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. 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.

### **What does this mean for the TCMC?**

Fortunately for everyone concerned, the trend is looking up. Almost every direction one would wish to evaluate a passenger train with the exclusion of urban train travel looks very promising.

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. 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.

With that knowledge experts in the 21st century have begun to look at these regional corridors as opportunities to increase ridership. One train each direction per day can be inefficient for many potential train passengers. Not to mention the fact that the Empire Builder eastbound will be late on any given day, and the new FRA on-time standards haven't changed that. A second passenger train that originates in Chicago for westbounds and St. Paul for eastbounds is an easy solution for many issues.

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. The estimate is approximately 70-75 percent of riders will be for personal or leisure reasons.

Will there be enough existing, repeat train travelers and new passengers to fill two trains each direction daily? The current trends for how the American public would prefer to travel in this region would suggest the answer yes. The current trends in Amtrak ridership would also answer yes. We still must deal with the COVID virus in our society, but it's obvious in all our communities that the general Wisconsin population desires to return to, or begin a new normal living with the virus. This would include passenger train travel.

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 campus.

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?

This is just one example of how a second daily train along the Empire Builder corridor within the Wisconsin borders could have numerous benefits for a greater number of stakeholders.

### **SUPPLY CHAIN ISSUES**

I'm tired of hearing about supply chain issues, but I understand the importance of the discussion in everyday life. Supply Chain issues are currently effecting Amtrak and are altering numerous plans daily.

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.

Using Supply Chain issues as an excuse will likely be the cloud over the TCMC train for at least the first 12 months of operation. It is an entirely avoidable circumstance, with the capability of pointing fingers multiple directions regionally and nationally. In 2022 we have a situation where we can begin to build a new foundation for inner city passenger rail in the Midwest. New passenger cars are coming in from Siemens monthly. But it still may take a year or more for the new cars to be put in service with the subsequent shifting of the older cars to the newer routes waiting in the balance.

The reality here is Amtrak doesn't have enough inspectors in the Midwest to certify the new Siemens cars fast enough. Comments have circulated over some of the Siemens cars failing inspection tests for a handful of reasons. Amtrak is also short on mechanics that can repair or remodel the older cars that are otherwise road worthy. This older set of passenger cars are waiting for attention before they can be returned to revenue service.

I have no greater example of Supply Chain issues than the recent fact that the Hiawatha consists were reduced to three cars in late July because the fourth car had a more desperate need somewhere else. Wisconsin has been selling out the Hiawatha on weekends for a couple of months now, but that didn't matter to Amtrak. For the near-term Hiawatha passengers on the weekends are simply going to have to squeeze into three cars.

**(CRISI note one)** Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) aims to advance intercity passenger and freight rail projects that promote FRA's key goals of safety, economic growth, transportation equity, and sustainable and resilient infrastructure. CRISI-funded projects will enhance multi-modal connections, address slow orders, and fix up 100-year-old track to speed up the movement of goods from ports to rail to trucks to shelves. As the nation continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, these upgrades and expansions will help state and local governments and rail carriers meet renewed travel demand and strengthen supply chains.

## **EMPIRE BUILDER SCHEDULE CHANGE**

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 is these current 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, instead of a large schedule change.