

21st CENTURY MADISON PASSENGER RAIL 2.0

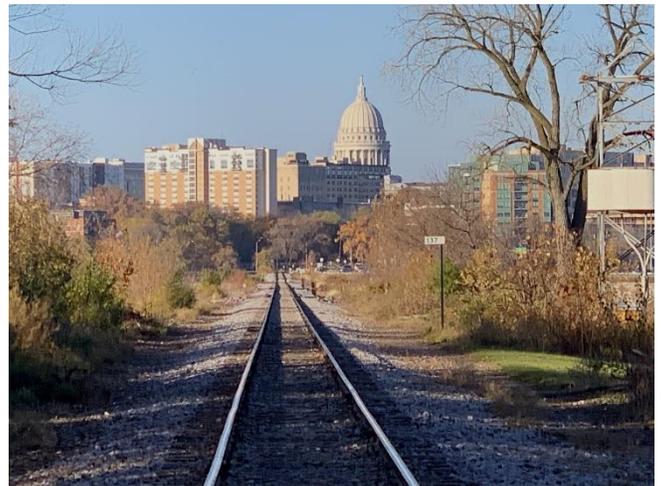
By Susan Foote-Martin and Terry Brown

October 29, 2022 - Almost everyone living in Madison, Wisconsin has an opinion of the 2009-2010 drama series, which dealt with a large sum of money given to the State of Wisconsin for the sole purpose of bringing passenger trains to town. The eventual failure of this storied drama when then Governor Scott Walker turned the Federal funding back has seemingly forever scarred more than just the citizens of Madison.

In the 2022 version covering a similar topic, the City of Madison is already taking a more proactive and self-controlling approach to the process examining ways to utilize current federal funding to bring passenger rail back to the Wisconsin State Capital city.

For most of the 21st Century funding from the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is mostly in the form of grants, and the processes have always been competitive between all applications submitted. This form of support from Washington D.C. usually requires some degree of a local match, as the FRA will not fully fund any rail project. Also, most passenger rail advocates and experts of the grants and other funding opportunities coming from the FRA have suggested the local authorities partnering with states for the application should show some “skin” in the project. It’s not a written requirement, but those with street-smarts have understood those that go beyond a wish and a prayer greatly increase their chances of success with “skin” in the game.

With that sage in mind, the City of Madison has begun the task of hiring experts and budgeting significant money to show support for some nationally recognized engineers evaluating prime locations within the Madison proper for a suitable Intermodal Station. Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway contends there are opportunities to reposition several sites in Madison for economic development with some being suitable for the location of a passenger rail station.



In July 2022, the City of Madison awarded a \$125,000 contract to HNTB (1), a national consulting firm with offices in Madison and Milwaukee to lead a station identification study. The results of the contract will be reported directly to the Mayor. Also, the Mayor’s 2023 budget calls for \$350,000 “to help plan how to bring Amtrak service to Madison”.

Philip Gritzmacher, Transportation Planner for the City of Madison expects the city should have a passenger station location recommendation by February 2023. Criteria include that the site be procurable, be on the route and be clear to serve the Twin Cities in the future.

A price tag estimate of \$500 million for the service with an 80/20 cost share means that most of the support can come from the federal government should Madison win a grant. But the remaining \$100 million will need to come from other sources. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) signed into law by President Biden in November 2021, has allocated \$12 billion for passenger rail corridors like the Madison Extension. It is expected the Madison train, an extension of the popular Amtrak Hiawatha service running between Milwaukee and Chicago, would continue several times a day past Milwaukee to Madison and return.

(1) Note: HNTB is the engineering contractor supporting the current development of the Twin Cities- Milwaukee- Chicago train- TCMC. This is the proposed second daily train running along the Empire Builder

route through central Wisconsin. This train will run on the Canadian Pacific track, the former Milwaukee Road.

Ashley F. Booth, Vice President HNTB says that “Madison is a critical market that should be served along the TCMC passenger rail corridor. Madison is demonstrating continued progress and commitment to prepare for a future extension of the highly successful Hiawatha service and to become part of a future Midwest backbone route that has high ridership potential.”

AREN'T THERE OTHER CARRIERS THAT CAN HANDLE THIS TRAIN?

Absolutely. An operator called **Keolis** operates the Virginia Railway Express. Another operator **Herzog** operates the New Mexico Railrunner Express, and there are others. But for a project in a fiscally conservative State like Wisconsin, the opportunity to keep costs down looms large. For this reason, Amtrak probably makes the most sense, utilizing the Amtrak Midwest pool of power and cars to carry passengers as an extension of the Hiawatha service, instead of forcing a “terminal connection” point where passengers would have to change trains and services in Milwaukee.



Others have spoken of a train that runs direct from Milwaukee to Madison. Yes, this train could be a commuter train extension of Metra. This train could be serviced by an alternate carrier mentioned in the previous paragraph. All of these options will likely carry a higher price tag than what was mentioned earlier, if for no other reason because the City of Madison and/ or the State of Wisconsin will have to purchase or directly lease power and passenger cars for the service.

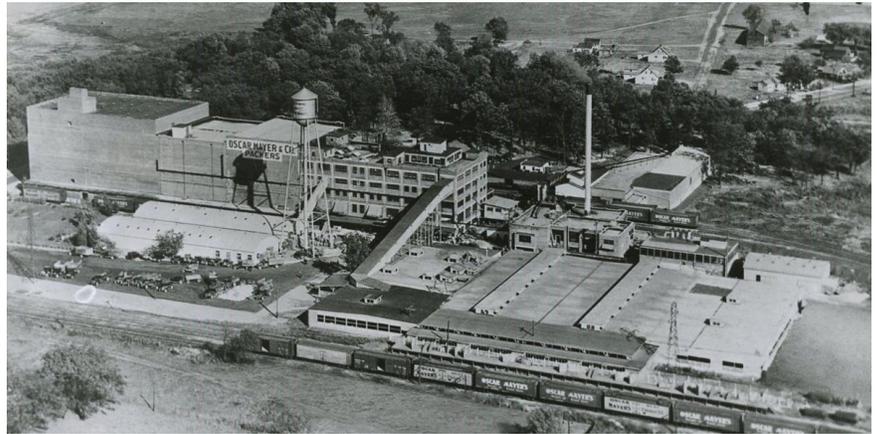
WHAT LOCATION IS BEST FOR MADISON STATION 2028?

This topic was one that some would say delayed the project enough in 2010 that it was ultimately killed by the newly elected Governor Scott Walker in 2011. This topic could create enough dissent again that the project could be seriously delayed and miss federal funding opportunities.

To not repeat history the City of Madison, in funding for an Intermodal Station study is attempting to find a suitable location that can support a contemporary multi-modal junction for all. Other passenger rail committees and advocates have labeled Madison as not an endpoint for a Hiawatha Extension to return to Milwaukee, but as a Midwest Regional train that would continue to the Minneapolis- St. Paul Twin Cities. This would require the passenger train to avoid any backup moves that could waste 20 minutes or more servicing Madison before continuing northward.

Leading Intermodal locations in the discussion for Madison include the Dane County Regional Airport and the former Oscar Mayer plant. Looking at the Dane County Regional Airport option, this is quite far away from Downtown Madison. Good Intermodal connections are a must for this location to be successful. The Canadian Pacific track that's the most likely option for a Madison train continuing to the Twin Cities travels just west of the airport. Connecting this track to a location near the airport would be an Urban Planners' design dream project and would require significant study and design discussion.

The second option seemingly most favored is the former Oscar Mayer plant. It is situated along the track that is the preferred route for the train to continue to the Twin Cities. There should be room for a station platform track separate from a freight train through main. It is closer to Downtown Madison than Dane County Regional Airport with a few reasonable multi-lane roads for access. But is it close enough for most that live in the Madison area?



Other possible sites for a rail (or Intermodal) station include First Street at East Washington Avenue on the far east side of downtown Madison at the end of Isthmus. This area has been on some radars for a decade or more. The track from the east from Sun Prairie and Watertown is a must, and it's here. The track curves and continues to the north and would connect easily to the line continuing to Portage and the Twin Cities. This neighborhood has much going for it, but it doesn't have a large green space available for a train depot, a bus terminal turn-around and a taxi pad with all the amenities. The land values here would require a steep up-front cost. Are the City of Madison taxpayers willing to pay the high upfront premium for having the future Madison Train Depot in a high-rent district?

A second central downtown location that has hidden under the radar would be on South Livingston Street northeast of the Capitol Square, possibly bordered by East Main St, South Paterson St., and the Capital City Bike Trail. It's an intriguing looking property when you look at it via Google Maps/ Satellite. But is it truly available?

Picture note: The Black & White photo on page three is from Madison.com. This is labeled as a 1919 aerial photo of the Oscar Meyer plant. The smokestack that's center-right in the photo still stands today. Plenty of box cars at the bottom of the picture branded for Oscar Meyer are no doubt of wooden construction. There's plenty of other things to comment about in this picture that's over 100 years old. Could this be the location of the next daily passenger train to visit Madison?

ARE HISTORIC STATION LOCATIONS AVAILABLE?

It's amazing to think according to HistoricMadison.org that SIX passenger rail stations once existed in Madison. Post WWII trends obviously doomed these community heirlooms of the past. A past station, the Milwaukee Road Depot built in 1903 and located on 640 West Washington Avenue, is currently used as a shopping center.



Milwaukee Road 35A, an EMD E8A locomotive sits on display outside the depot along with several Milwaukee Road, NY Central Railroad and Metropolitan Transportation Authority passenger cars. A single-tracked line operated by the Wisconsin and Southern Railroad remains in front of the depot. The depot is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the State Register of Historic Places and is not likely to be under consideration for Madison's new station. There simply isn't enough space for the 21st Century amenities.

The other prominent railroad line in Wisconsin, the NorthWestern had a station near the intersection of South Blair St. and what's now Railroad St. The track that served the station now ends at South Livingston St. This building still stands today as office space for Madison Gas and Electric. (MGE) For numerous reasons this building is not an option for the current Madison Extension.