

## **WisARP meeting October 29 in Madison**

*Saturday, October 29, 2022, was the Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers Fall General Meeting in Madison. Here are some of my notes during this meeting about the TCMC train.*

*Updated November 14, 2022* - Arun Rao has been a staple at the WisARP meetings but did miss the March 2022 meeting in Appleton. He returned in person for this meeting as the Director of Network Development for Amtrak. For years Rao has been representing the Wisconsin Department of Transportation as Passenger Rail Manager, mostly reporting on the multiple successes of the Hiawatha train that runs between Milwaukee and Chicago. Now he wears the Amtrak Blue and was definitely toeing a different line.

The territory Rao is responsible for is the central United States stretching from the Upper Midwest all the way to the Gulf Coast. He is still looking over Wisconsin passenger rail, but from a different angle.



### **TCMC COMMENTS**

Many traditional talking points Amtrak and WisDOT have been using for several years regarding the benefits of the TCMC train were on display again this day. The TCMC train will be the second daily train between the Twin Cities, Milwaukee, and Chicago running along the Empire Builder corridor. One of those prime talking points is that roughly 60% of the population of Wisconsin lives within the travel shed of the TCMC; which is putting them within 25 miles of the track corridor the train will use.

Amtrak expects the total economic impact including leveraging expenses of the second daily train to be 25 million. **Check the WisARP YouTube Channel < WisARP Wisconsin > for the video of Arun Rao's presentation at this meeting.**

Once again, the reliability of the eastbound Empire Builder is still a topic of discussion even though it's been one year since the Federal Railroad Administration began enforcement of new On-Time Performance standards. The new benchmark for acceptable performance is 80 percent within 15 minutes of posted arrival times. The eastbound #8 Empire Builder continues to flounder overall in On-Time Performance for Fiscal Year 2022. Therefore, attendees to this meeting were given another dose of why the eastbound TCMC is needed for a reliable train heading towards Milwaukee and Chicago.

We're looking forward to bus connections with the TCMC train between Eau Claire and Tomah. It was also announced that WisDOT is looking at the possibility of having a shuttle bus run from Madison to Columbus to meet up with the TCMC train.

Rao also said in the future Amtrak would be looking to extend the TCMC train all the way to downtown Minneapolis. The TCMC when it rolls, will be stopping at the St. Paul Union Station, the current location stop for the long-distance Empire Builder train.

"Minnesota DOT wants to extend a "Corridor" from St. Paul Union Depot (SPUD) to a stop in Minneapolis, or on the north side of the metro as I understand it for the second (TCMC) train," according to Brian Nelson,

President of All Aboard Minnesota. “SPUD is not geographically desirable for many as two-thirds of the metro area lives in Minneapolis or the surrounding suburbs.”

“SPUD is a beautiful multi-modal facility, but its location is a challenge,” Nelson continues. Ridership on the Empire Builder has suffered as a result.” If Nelson is correct, TCMC ridership should see a boost if MnDOT and Amtrak can deliver on a Minneapolis connector.

### **Inflation Inflation Inflation**

With Rao no longer employed at WisDOT, Lisa Stern was introduced for the first time as The Voice for Passenger Rail in Wisconsin. Her official title is Chief of Railroad and Harbors, and although many of the visuals were repeats from the Rao era, some of the news she brought reflected one of the buzzwords of 2022: Inflation.



In what should be no surprise to anyone, the effects of inflation will have an impact on the construction costs of the TCMC. Stern commented that WisDOT (and MnDOT) will be looking at options for supplemental funding to cover the increased cost of construction for the TCMC train.

The only TCMC construction project inside the State of Wisconsin is a boarding track at the LaCrosse Station. This will re-install a track that existed decades ago for the old Milwaukee Road

passenger train service.

Stern also talked about the two grade crossings just east of the LaCrosse Depot. These are the at-grade train crossings between the Canadian Pacific LaCrosse yard and the passenger depot. These are the city street crossings of Avon and Hagar Streets, and the crossing of Liberty and St. Cloud streets, WITH two tracks running through each street crossings.

This project was not on the original wish list of projects under consideration for the TCMC construction back in 2017, but Stern commented her Highway and Safety Program experience raised concerns over these two grade crossings, crossing four city streets. Double gates at each street protecting traffic plus separate smaller barrier gates for pedestrians raises the specter of a high-priced solution. This project will be approached as a separate project by WisDOT, which importantly gives design engineers more time to consider all options and create the best option for safety and lower cost.

Remember, all grants for the TCMC train were awarded before the implementation of IIJA. (The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021.) Any new grant rules you hear regarding IIJA funding may not apply to TCMC funding since that funding falls under the old PRIIA act of 2008.

### **Hiawatha News**

Through the devastating loss of ridership due to Covid on the Hiawatha service, Stern reiterated WisDOT’s priority remains getting the 8<sup>th</sup> daily Hiawatha train running, and the ultimate hope of ten daily Hiawatha trains. The eighth daily train will likely represent the TCMC train. The Canadian Pacific railroad has continued their demands have to be met before the eighth Hiawatha train can run.

The demands are, Improvements at the Milwaukee airport station which is a pedestrian walkway above the tracks allowing boarding and detraining on either track; and signaling on the CP track west of the downtown intermodal station.

Included in the Hiawatha improvement package is the Muskego Yard cutoff. The environmental impact study for Muskego yard was recently finished in late summer 2022. This was necessary for the beginning of the construction process, which will move Canadian Pacific freight trains running through the Milwaukee Intermodal Station and route them through Muskego yard. Freight trains crawling through the Milwaukee Intermodal Station at 10mph blocking the passenger train platform track have added misery to mostly Empire Builder trains.



Ridership on the Hiawatha did improve Fiscal year 2022 over FY2021. But the 2022 numbers are only about 60 percent of the FY2019 rider numbers. Rao specifically mentioned service in Virginia has had a stronger recovery than most states, prompting a new third daily train to Norfolk and a new second daily train to Roanoke. Both services FY2022 ridership numbers equaled or exceeded FY2019 rider numbers.

*Note: Amtrak's Fiscal Year mirrors the Federal Fiscal Year calendar. FY2022 began October 1, 2021, through September 30, 2022. FY2023 began October 1, 2022.*

Stern mentioned the Hiawatha had its fourth coach car returned this fall. With the table car included, it is a five car consist again with four revenue coach cars. This allows Amtrak and WisDOT to maximize ridership revenue for the weekend days in particular. WisDOT still lost important revenue opportunities from summer travelers the last half of July and all of August due to the loss of the fourth coach car. The Hiawatha picture on this page (courtesy of Alan Baker) from October 5, 2022 shows one Charger engine on the lead, and one older FP40 engine that was converted into a Cabbage car on the rear.

Rao mentioned Amtrak is looking at ways to increase business use of the TCMC train and the Hiawatha service. Over the summer the transportation experts at the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development estimated Chicago businesses are only working at downtown offices two days per week. Jason Ilstrup, President of Downtown Madison said at the WisARP Meeting his organization estimates workers are returning to downtown Madison three days per week. What are ways these numbers can be increased when the workers are resisting daily travel back to downtown workspaces?

### **Other passenger rail news**

Rao commented that Amtrak is looking to hire a significant number of employees ongoing. These are meant to replace employees that left at the onset of COVID, and additional employees needed with the new train activity as a result of IIJA funding. This news with numerous media accounts of Amtrak working on new equipment purchases systemwide for all trains underscores the fact that Amtrak may be treading water implementing new train equipment in addition to remodeling plans for existing passenger cars.