

MIPRC CONFERENCE OBSERVATIONS

By Brian Nelson, President - All Aboard Minnesota

Editor's Note: The Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC) Annual Meeting was held in Indianapolis on November 16 thru the 18th. Brian Nelson attended this meeting as a representative of All Aboard Minnesota (AAMN). Below is a summary of observations and information learned. Observations and opinions in this story are by Nelson alone.

Overall Summary State DOT's are really stepping up plans throughout the Midwest for expanded and new passenger rail corridors. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is really stepping up their Corridor ID program to help states plan, implement, and fund (grant opportunities) new and expanded corridor service. There are many new plans to expand rail corridors in seven states. This is a very dynamic time for passenger rail.

FRA Overview Amit Bose, Administrator for the FRA, confirmed by the US Senate in January 2022, made an appearance at the MIPRC Annual Meeting. He mostly spoke of the programs the FRA has available promoting passenger rail throughout the United States.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) signed into law by President Biden in November 2021, has already allocated \$185 Billion for passenger rail. \$1.4B in Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) Grants have already been allocated primarily for grade crossings and more, three times more than previous administrations. The FRA has expanded partnerships with states, and \$12 Billion is allocated for states over the next five years to establish new service in corridors that are considered long term sustainable.

Corridor ID Program plans from states are due in December 2022, although there will be opportunities in the future to submit plans and expression of interest letters during the next two years from what I heard. The FRA is expanding the Corridor ID program/office and redoing their policy office. The message was that the FRA is really stepping up to help states with new corridors and get an overall plan in place with the intent of full implementation.

State DOT summaries

Illinois – In Fiscal Year 2019 Illinois had five million riders in their 5 corridors. Illinois paid Amtrak \$55 Million for their corridors, which would have run October 1, 2018, to September 30, 2019. Their expansion plans include new service from Chicago to the Quad Cities and Rockford.



Indiana – After failing to fund the former Hoosier service Amtrak train between Indianapolis and Chicago in 2019, the State of Indiana would like to re-establish Hoosier service between Chicago and Indianapolis daily. Indiana is also requesting a daily Cardinal long-distance train.

West Virginia has formed a states' coalition across the entire Cardinal train route to increase this service to daily, but Indiana has not joined. They stated they need a formal invite to do so, but one meeting attendee strongly criticized Indiana officials over their failure to join. The Indiana state DOT has about 3,300 employees, all but 22 are multi-modal personnel with only three in rail. Like most states, most DOT employees are focused on roads and bridges.

The State of Indiana also wants to re-establish passenger rail service through Ft. Wayne on the old Pennsylvania Railroad route, ultimately continuing into Ohio. The economic and feasibility plans are done.

Michigan – This state has three main corridors: Pere Marquette (to Grand Rapids), Blue Water (traveling through Kalamazoo, Battle Creek, and East Lansing,) which are both a single daily train. The Michigan DOT wants to add another daily round trip on each route. The Wolverine which parallels much of I-94 is now three daily trains, and hopes are to expand to 10 trains daily. All Michigan trains begin 110mph running at Porter, IN. MDOT hopes to enable the entire Wolverine route for 110mph. The long-term plan is to extend the Wolverine to Windsor, Ontario. MDOT wants to establish new service on a Detroit, Toledo, and Cleveland routing for better eastern connections and build a new station in Detroit.

To expand 110mph east of Jackson, MI., engineers will need to focus on the western portion of this route straightening out curves and renewing bridges. There is a \$196.5M American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA signed into law in 2009.) grant for the line. There is also a \$6.5M State of Good Repair (SOGR from 2020.) grant for gates and bridges. Ridership of 598k in all three corridors this year is almost pre-covid levels.

Minnesota - Dan Krom, Director of the Passenger Rail Office for MnDOT, provided Minnesota's update. The main corridor focus for the new MN state rail plan is the NLX to Duluth, MN and Superior, WI.; extending the TCMC second daily train to Fargo, ND, and ultimately up to Grand Forks and Winnipeg. Other routes on the MN State Rail Plan are the Twin Cities to Kansas City route, Twin Cities to Sioux Falls and Sioux City, SD. A third daily train from TC to Chicago routed through Madison and Eau Claire is also on the rail plan. Arun Rao, now with Amtrak, stated it's still Amtrak's plan to run the second daily train to Duluth and back.

Krom said MnDOT has been in touch with Iowa and Missouri DOTs about TC-KC service. Krom also mentioned Minnesota does not have a corridor program. MN will be taking the lead from Wisconsin for the TCMC second train planning and implementation, and MnDOT plans to submit letters of interest to the FRA for all corridors in December 2022.

Krom gave All Aboard Minnesota a very nice call out, complementing us on our outreach and advocacy for their plans. This is a huge recognition for AAMN in front of this group. He also called out the Great River Rail Commission, (GRRRC)

Minnesota State Senators Scott Newman (R) and John Jasinski (R) attended and spoke to the importance of TC-KC service and their interest in making this happen. "We need better connections other than through Chicago," said Newman. "We are kind of hanging out on the western end of the system." Newman also commented there is interest in the MN Legislature with this route. Sen. Newman is retiring but has indicated he would stay connected in State Government and has also indicated Intercity Passenger Rail is one issue he favors.

Wisconsin - The Hiawatha trains generated over 880k riders in 2019 with 85 percent farebox recovery and 90 percent On-Time Performance. (OTP) You Badgers already know these are great stats out of the Midwest that we can use. I noted new



bus lines to connect trains, especially the TCMC second daily train to Eau Claire. There have been Amtrak buses connecting the Green Bay corridor to Milwaukee since the 2010s decade. The Wisconsin 2050 Rail Plan should be made public soon, which will include rail service to Madison and Green Bay. Scott Rogers from Eau Claire is building business coalitions in Eau Claire and Green Bay to promote and support new and expanded passenger service in the Wisconsin State legislature.

This picture from early February 2022 by Al Baker, shows Amtrak 504 in Hiawatha service. Normally

used on the West Coast, 504 was built in 1991 by General Electric, based on the Dash-8 -40BW Freight engine.

Missouri- River Runner route had 176k riders FY2022. The Kansas City, St. Louis to Chicago run-through began May 22, 2022, and ridership is 80% pre-covid. MoDOT wants to get the second daily train running again as soon as possible, maybe December 2022. MoDOT also wishes to expand service between Chicago, Quincy, IL, Hannibal, MO, and Branson, MO, where there is major tourism already to build ridership. The River Runner generated \$65M in labor income, \$208M in economic activity, and \$22M in tax revenue. MoDOT wants to accommodate bikes and plans a new pilot program to begin next year.

IJA Act and what it holds in store for MIPRC and our states session -

FRA has established the Corridor ID Program which can be used for new or enhanced service. The corridors selected get priority for funding and planning. There can only be one submission per corridor, which is important if a corridor crosses a state line. The state DOTs will need to figure out which state takes the lead on multi-state corridors. Once initial submissions are vetted and selected, the FRA will release a national map. Corridors selected will receive a \$500k grant for planning in phase one. Phase two must include a service development plan, and phase three includes a 20% match.

The Federal State Partnership program is broken down into two groups, the NorthEast Corridor (NEC) and the national network. The Office of Rail Development, Amtrak's NEC Corridor, and the Corridor ID Program are all available for multi-layered assistance for the states. The FRA plans on new regional outreach sessions in 2023.

FRA Long Distance Study - The goal for this work is to link communities from rural to urban, and large and small towns and cities in regional networks. Studies will include long-distance trains Amtrak previously ran and discontinued, like the North Coast Limited, long-distance services that existed prior to Amtrak and could include new services. The goal for new long-distance services is to advance community relationships, economic well-being, and connectivity for rural areas.

The FRA has identified five study regions throughout the U.S., and from what I heard there will be four rounds of stakeholder meetings in 2023 per region. The final study recommendation will be done about one year from now. The stakeholders are Amtrak, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), host freight railroads, Onboard Amtrak Employee organizations, Regional Passenger Rail Authorities, Tribes, and Organizations Representing Amtrak Passengers. Sounds like this program is just getting started.

New Venture Cars - The Amtrak Midwest order is 54 - 70 seat coaches, 30 of which have been delivered already. Also 17 business/coaches have been ordered which contains 36 business seats and 16 coach seats; and 17 cafe/coaches which will be delivered in early January 2023. The cafe/coaches will have integrated wheelchair lifts.

Siemens - Vendor issues that were noted at this meeting include: cracked ceiling brackets and lead pipe fittings, which in my opinion were very much downplayed. Dan Krom mentioned in his address Minnesota will buy into the Midwest Venture car pool. This might accelerate the implementation of these new coaches on the TCMC second daily train.

The summer long-distance train service meltdown issues were mentioned a couple of times throughout the meeting, but never seriously discussed at length. Since there were up to ten Amtrak managers attending it would have been the perfect opportunity to get some answers. Avoidance of these issues at the meeting was very disappointing in my opinion. There was no discussion of the Superliner issues or of their replacement.

The picture at the left is the Great Northern Streamlined Coach Car #1213 from the Minnesota Transportation Museum, out on an excursion one day posing under the Amtrak St. Paul, MN station sign. This picture courtesy of the MTM through Pinterest.



Chicago Union Station - Arun Rao, Director of Network Development, Central Region from Amtrak discussed many of the projects coming up at CUS at your (WisARP) October 2022 meeting. Check out the YouTube video at [WisARP Wisconsin](#) of his presentation and his detail.

Note on attendees - This meeting was very well attended including administrators and staff from the FRA, State DOTs, commissioners, assorted politicians, and advocacy groups from most of the states. Kevin Roggenbuck attended representing Ramsey County MN and GRRC.

Arun Rao, formerly the Passenger Rail Manager for WisDOT, is now employed by Amtrak since late summer 2022. His region of command is the center part of the United States from the Upper Midwest to the Gulf Coast implementing new corridors, working with states, the host railroads, and more.

Derrick James was also in attendance. He mentioned at the meeting that he plans to "staff up" his Government Relations team.

Bob Johnston, Trains Magazine columnist frequently writing about Amtrak, expressed concern about Amtrak's meltdown and their current leadership. He praised AAMN for sending his article on Amtrak's capacity crisis to the MN US Congressional Delegation. "That's what all rail advocates should be doing. Great!!" Johnston told me. For the March 2023 Trains issue, he wrote an extensive article on VIA, saying they are a total mess.

Mason Baxter with the Association for Innovative Passenger Rail Operations. I have never heard of them personally, but they are a business development group for non-Amtrak passenger operators like Herzog, Keolis and component suppliers. He expressed strong interest in the Twin Cities -Kansas City route, thinking it has great potential and wants to work with us on it. He has a meeting with Union Pacific next month, and I'm sure the topic of passenger trains rolling on that route will come up.

December 6, 2022, edited by tb