

As we enter the second month of 2023 there is not much new- news to report on, but there is enough news that's important to those who want to see the TCMC roll. This issue will review some issues that will be playing out between now and Memorial Day 2023.

*Note: some of the new information included in this newsletter was learned at the West Central Wisconsin Rail Coalition meeting on January 26, 2023. Lisa Stern, Chief of Railroads and Harbors for Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) was one of the marquee speakers. **By the time you read this issue her video presentation could be available at West Central Wisconsin's YouTube channel.***

Perhaps the biggest news for all of us that want to see the TCMC train rolling, was the news from several of the speakers at the West Central Wisconsin meeting that the TCMC train would roll in 2023. Or could roll in 2023. Or should roll in 2023.

Reading into the comments heard, there wasn't any hard commitment to running the TCMC seven days a week in its inaugural running. The lead issue in running the train three times a week instead of daily would most likely rest upon Amtrak. The issue of enough roadworthy equipment and the ability to staff the trains continues to be a dark cloud hanging over Blue & Gray. Honestly, there are other concerns that could dog this train from starting a daily run this year. But Amtrak's capability of providing equipment, power, and staffing will likely override all other concerns.

As discussed at the West Central Wisconsin Rail Coalition meeting. Stern noted that there are several issues with three specific projects surrounding the Hiawatha service. These projects need to be finished before the Canadian Pacific railroad will allow an eighth daily Hiawatha train. The three projects remain: construction of a second platform at the Milwaukee Airport Station, construction of a freight bypass through Muskego Freight Yard, and last is a signal upgrade from the Milwaukee Intermodal Station for about two miles west, or about the area where the mainline swings northeast of American Family Field where the Milwaukee Brewers play.

The project that's likely top of mind for WisDOT is the second platform at the Airport Station. Former Passenger Rail Manager Arun Rao received a Federal Grant for the project, and WisDOT had completed design plans. But time, the pandemic and *INFLATION* have interrupted the progress. The design plans are being re-evaluated and the construction will go out for bids again, possibly in April. WisDOT will likely be applying for an additional FRA grant to cover the additional expenses due to inflation.

Why is this Eighth Daily Hiawatha train important? That train would truly be the TCMC; the Hiawatha Extension train that would continue beyond Milwaukee, to LaCrosse and St. Paul.

What if Amtrak brings two consists forward for the TCMC and the three construction projects mentioned above aren't completed? What happens then?

The TCMC WILL roll, for the most part.

That coveted, seemingly elusive eighth slot for the Hiawatha is very important for the TCMC, but it won't stop the train from performing. Everyone is hoping Amtrak can supply two trainsets and staff them so this train can begin during the summer of 2023. In the likely event that the eighth train slot won't be available yet, the TCMC train will finish its run at the Milwaukee Intermodal Station, and the passengers continuing southward towards



Chicago will need to board a regular Hiawatha train. A rather minor nuisance, but a small effort necessary to make the journey complete. If this situation happens, all parties including CP dispatchers will be extremely aware of the need to make this TCMC to Hiawatha connection as smooth as possible.

Based on the last paragraph, [can you estimate the schedule of the TCMC?](#) The latest estimate of travel time for the TCMC from St. Paul to Chicago supplied by WisDOT is 7.5 hours. If the southbound TCMC meets the #340



Hiawatha for a 5:45p southbound run to Union Station, it would need to leave St. Paul between 11:00a and 11:30a. This would put the end-to-end journey at Chicago about 7:14p. This train would arrive in La Crosse approximately 2:00p.

The northbound TCMC will likely leave Chicago Union Station as the #333 Hiawatha, which is scheduled to arrive in Milwaukee at 12:34p. Continuing to St. Paul the train should arrive between 6:45p and 7p. This

train would stop in La Crosse approximately 3:45p. *These estimates are by WisARP/ TCMC Newsletter, and not published Amtrak guidance. When the Hiawatha eighth train begins, the TCMC will likely make an adjustment to the schedule at that time.*

[How long will it take](#) WisDOT, HNTB, the Canadian Pacific Railway and all the other construction partners to complete these three projects? No one will say for sure. Between you and me, let's just say the end of summer 2024. *INFLATION* will likely have an impact on the date this work finishes. WisDOT may need to re-apply for more FRA money to cover the additional costs expected.

Remember, we have Canadian Pacific's word that the TCMC will run before the TCMC construction projects are finished. There is just one area of need in Wisconsin for the TCMC, which is primarily a boarding track the LaCrosse depot. Other construction areas are on the other side of the Mississippi River in La Crescent and Winona in Minnesota.

[How long will it take](#) Amtrak to bring two trainsets forward? No one will say for sure answering this question either. Everyone is hoping for this summer, the summer of 2023. That would be an ideal time of year to start this service during a summer travel season. Unlike the Hiawatha's, the TCMC will need to have a Café Car for the usual snack counter Amtrak provides on these intercity trains.

Another piece of news that has begun to have clarity is a Federal Grant for additional money to offset the State of Wisconsin's share to operate the train. In May 2020 it was announced Wisconsin and Minnesota will receive over \$12 million from an FRA Restoration and Enhancement Grant to offset the cost of the TCMC not covered by ticket revenue for the first three years. There is another FRA grant opportunity that exists covering operating revenue, now extending out to six years. WisDOT and MnDOT are working on the application for this grant money.

MINNESOTA GOVERNOR TIM WALZ revealed his budget in January for the upcoming budget discussions in the Gopher State. The Governor is asking for \$2 million to cover Minnesota's share of the expected inflationary cost of infrastructure work, and about \$9 million to help cover operating costs for several years going forward. This information along with the rest of his budget will be up for discussions and negotiations leading up to July 1, 2023, when the next MN budget year begins.

EMPIRE BUILDER RIDERSHIP CONTINUES UPWARD TREND IN 2022

For anyone that rode the Empire Builder during the summer of 2022, the news that ridership at the Empire Builder stops West of Milwaukee increased 39% for the year should come as no surprise.

This increase still leaves the five stops West of Milwaukee about 32% below the ridership for fiscal year 2019. Fiscal Year 2019 is the last full year before Covid restrictions began in March of 2020. The five Builder stops west of Milwaukee include Columbus, Portage, Wisconsin Dells, Tomah, and LaCrosse. These five stations only see one train per day, normally, in each direction.

It's possible ridership in Fiscal Year 2022 could have increased even more if Amtrak would have matched the same size consist that they had in 2019. For most of 2022 the Empire Builder had eight passenger cars, which would have included sleeping cars, a lounge car, and a dining car. This count does not include the baggage car. This count is two cars shorter than the typical consist would have been in 2019. *(Thanks to Brian Nelson, President of All Aboard Minnesota for confirming this.)*



Regardless the numbers show central Wisconsin is ready to accept passenger train service again, with or without facial masks. If the TCMC train can roll in the summer of 2023, this should help increase the number of passengers utilizing these stations.

Stern commented at the WisARP General Membership Meeting in late October 2022, that 60 percent of the population of Wisconsin lives within the Travel Shed of the Empire Builder and TCMC trains. This Shed is represented by 25 miles either direction of the Builder corridor. Is that crazy to think that many people live within a short drive of one of the TCMC stops?

WISCONSIN RAIL PLAN 2050

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation has opened a website which contains the current draft of the Wisconsin Rail Plan 2050. This plan will replace the 2030 Rail Plan. The website also allows Wisconsin residents to make comments to WisDOT regarding the plan.

The public comment period ends February 26, 2023, but you should be able to view the website and read all of the preliminary information supplied by WisDOT.

<https://www.wisdotplans.gov/plan/wrp2050>

The Rail Plan itself is a 469-page document. A hefty document to consume for most people. But the portion dedicated to Intercity Passenger Rail is only 40 pages. Another section regarding Commuter Rail is just an 18-page read.

In the short-term section of the document, the TCMC train tops the list. If you consider the starting point for the TCMC as the Amtrak 2015 Study results, there is still significant work to be done to get this train rolling inside of 10 years. But a second TCMC train could happen between 12-36 months after the first one rolls, as Canadian Pacific Railroad has hinted. The Rail Plan 2050 hints the second TCMC could visit Madison. It could also visit Eau Claire. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. The first TCMC train still hasn't entered revenue service yet.