



# Badger Rails

## Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers (WisARP)

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**Mark your calendars** – Saturday Oct 28 - Annual Fall Membership Meeting, details tba, southeastern WI.

### **NATIONAL PASSENGER RAIL FUNDING ON THE ROPES AGAIN?**

*Written by Terry Brown- TCMC Newsletter Editor with contributions from Susan Foote-Martin, Madison Extension Committee and Larry Rueff, Green Bay Extension Committee. August 2, 2023*

On July 12, the House of Representatives subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development (T-HUD) advanced a fiscal-year 2024 financial appropriations bill that would slash funding to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and Amtrak. The passing of this bill set off a flurry of alarms in the Passenger Rail community across this country that took weeks to simmer down.

The Senate Committee on Appropriations about one week later voted unanimously (29-0) for full rail funding and associated grants programs. With the House on full recess for the month of August, this topic will get a 35-plus day reprieve before the full Congress meets sometime in September to reconcile the differences in appropriations.

Amtrak CEO Stephen Gardner fears that if the House legislation becomes law, Amtrak would have to radically reduce or suspend service on several routes. The proposed cut would amount to a 64% cut from Amtrak's FY23 appropriation which is 76% lower than the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) Bill signed into law by President Biden in November 2021.

"Even if it were not such a wrong-headed move, the timing of this Bill is detrimental to expansion of passenger rail service," says Larry Rueff, Government Liaison for NEWRails and a WisARP Board Member. "We in Wisconsin are awaiting the decision this Fall of the FRA on the filings by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) for re-establishment of passenger rail service from Milwaukee to Green Bay and Madison. The T-HUD cut breaks the promise of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funding." Rueff's comments were in part taken from the Railroad Passengers Association's July 15, 2023, letter to the House Appropriations Committee.

The contrary appropriation Bills are part of a conflict between political parties that historically can lead to a government shutdown when the new Federal Fiscal Year begins on October 1st. While the House is on recess Passenger Rail advocates must let Congress know that the Bipartisan promise of full funding must be kept. On July 31 USA Today reported the full House could defeat the subcommittee T-HUD bill if just four traditionally fiscal conservative votes usually in favor of budget cuts to Passenger Rail funding are changed. Amtrak's footprint in the Upper Midwest into Wisconsin currently carries over 550,000 passengers per year with the Hiawatha Service between Milwaukee and Chicago. Just under 50,000 passengers west of Milwaukee in Fiscal Year 2022 utilize the Empire Builder for their transportation needs, not to mention another possible 125,000 more passengers waiting for a second daily train in Wisconsin along the Empire Builder route

west of Milwaukee. All of this could evaporate if the House appropriation becomes law for Fiscal Year 2024. As the July 20, 2023, Baltimore Sun Editorial Board wrote, investments in essential systems can add to the value of your enterprise. In this case, having multiple, healthy options for transportation is a worthy 21st century investment for many communities.

“The same holds true for all kinds of public infrastructure, including roads and bridges, railroads, airports, water and sewage treatment, the power grid, high-speed internet service and on and on,” wrote the Editorial Board. “Failure to meet expanding needs, let alone keep existing systems in repair, can literally doom a community.”

### **Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers Needs Your Help!**

Our hope in Wisconsin lies with the Senate and their version of the T-HUD appropriations bill. Action surrounding these appropriation bills are on pause until likely mid-September. WisARP is asking for your help to ask both Houses of Congress to fully fund the FRA and Amtrak at the agreed upon \$7 billion level, which was promised with the IJA.

An overview of current Federal funding projects for Passenger Rail in Wisconsin:

Construction projects in the Milwaukee area for the expansion of the Hiawatha Service up to 10 trains daily should not be affected by the T-HUD appropriations or any future Congressional negotiations this fall.

Construction projects in Wisconsin and Minnesota for the TCMC train- the second daily train between the Twin Cities, Milwaukee and Chicago could be affected if there are any cost overruns and WisDOT or the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) seek Federal funding to cover those overruns.

Hiawatha Extension trains to Madison and Green Bay including the Fox Valley could possibly be impacted by a significant cut in Passenger Rail funding. Currently both extension trains have applications with the FRA from WisDOT for the Corridor ID Federal funding program. Corridors eligible for the first phase of funding are expected to be announced in September or October 2023.

Corridor ID applications have also been submitted for the Eau Claire to St. Paul, MN train. This opportunity would be in partnership with the Chippewa -St. Croix Rail Commission. WisDOT also has a funding request submitted for Minnesota’s Northern Lights Express (NLX) Intercity Train from the Twin Cities to Duluth. A small portion of that train would travel into Wisconsin for a stop at Superior.

All these applications for Corridor ID projects could be subject to slashed funding if the House version of FY2024 Passenger Rail funding in the T-HUD bill is approved by both the House and the Senate.

WisARP is asking all members to reach out to your House representative and express your wish to keep Passenger Rail and our potential Extension opportunities fully funded not only in Wisconsin but across the nation. Amtrak currently provides a vital link between the small towns west of Milwaukee and the Big Cities like Minneapolis and Chicago, and beyond. For example, airline traffic continues to decrease in La Crosse, WI and Amtrak provides a critical option for some travelers in and out of La Crosse.

WisARP intends to follow up in September when both houses come together to reconcile the two funding bills. We need all our members and all Passenger Rail advocates to reach out to all elected members in Washington, D.C. demanding passenger rail be fully funded to make significant improvements in our national rail system. Nothing less will do.

WisARP has created a chart listing all eight U.S. Representatives from Wisconsin, with phone numbers to call

their offices. This chart is posted on our website. Please leave a message for the Representative stating your wish for passenger rail to remain fully funded per the IJJA/ BIL law. Wisconsin deserves the benefits of passenger rail that other states are already enjoying.

**TRIP REPORT – Northbound on #58 The City of New Orleans** by Nona Hill / Clark Johnson

*As a result of Amtrak's poor reputation for on-time running—and often not running at all—it was with some trepidation that we booked a room on the "City" for March 27 from Hammond, LA to Chicago.*

Due to leave Hammond at 2:45PM, #58 arrived about ten minutes down. Today the train had two sleepers, at the head of the train, behind the engine followed by a diner, lounge, two coaches and a baggage car. The first thing we noticed was how filthy the equipment was. In discussing this with the attendant, who was very good—friendly, knowledgeable, and not intrusive—he said that the car washers in both Chicago and New Orleans had been out of service for “years.” Question for Amtrak: how about assigning two employees with buckets, squeegees, and soapy water to do the job?

Inside, we had room E upstairs in the second sleeper, the car was clean, evidently recently refurbished and everything worked. I was impressed with the shower—plenty of hot water. Some lower-level passengers took advantage of the lengthy station stops to try and remove the thick dirt from their windows—not always successfully. Timekeeping was good as we arrived at most stations early; a half-hour early in Jackson, Mississippi through the miracle of recovery time baked into the timetable. And even with the convoluted back-up maneuver into Chicago Union Station we arrived there 45 minutes early. It appears that CN has improved dispatching as all meets were running meets. Freight trains were shorter and more frequent than previously. Perhaps the new CN management has abandoned the Hunter Harrison PSR syndrome. The right-of-way is also smoother than it was five years ago—the last time we traversed it. Maintenance is continuing as evidenced by the piles of new ties along the right-of-way.

The on-board dining situation, however, is a disaster. Service (still not available to coach passengers.) was in one of the new diners. The fully equipped kitchen was unused; no tablecloths, and plastic dishes and cutlery. Dinner is served in a large plastic bag and consists of a frozen dinner from the local supermarket, an acceptable salad and a roll. In First Class one does get a glass of wine or a beer with dinner. We judged the red wine was quite acceptable. Breakfast was again a selection of frozen entrees. The poor dining car attendant, working alone, managed to keep a positive attitude under very stressful conditions.

Would we do this again? Yes. The equipment inside was clean and functional, and the on-board personnel were about as good as we have ever had. However, Amtrak must improve the customer experience by washing the equipment, tightening up the schedule (by at least an hour) and restoring a full dining service with meals cooked on board. This is not the City of New Orleans I remember from the 1960s, yet it could be with professional passenger management. How expensive is a car washer and edible food?

**HOLIDAY SEASON 2022 TRIP REPORT- Florida to St Paul**

- by Andrew Selden, President of Minnesota Association of Railroad Passengers

After deciding to visit friends in Florida for New Year's Eve, I flew down (like normal people do) to Ft. Lauderdale on an uneventful 3 1/2-hour nonstop Delta flight. But to extend the trip, I also decided, after a long discussion of the risks, to come home by train. My wife and I used the Silver Meteor (98) from West Palm Beach to Washington, DC; the Capitol Limited (29) to Chicago, and the Portland Section (27) of the Empire Builder to St. Paul. Fortunately for us, the Empire Builder operated the day we were scheduled to ride it. One couldn't take that for granted this past winter, as Amtrak couldn't seem to run it in normal winter weather and annulled trips on short

or no notice. *This is another trip that Amtrak CEO Stephen Gardner doesn't know exists, as it involves three trains over 2 nights and three days, covering 2300 miles.*

**Day One: The Silver Meteor** - We began at the West Palm Beach station. Road signs point to the "Tri-Rail" commuter station, which also houses Greyhound and Amtrak, but none mention Amtrak. On the platform, no signage confirms that Amtrak even stops here, and if so, on which track. I set off to find an Amtrak agent. Beyond the Greyhound office along the iconic south Florida rail platform, I encountered TWO(!) most cheerful Amtrak employees, an agent, and the baggage guy. I was offered unprompted to check my bags and was explained where to stand to wait for the sleepers on #98.

The Silver trains still carry their sleepers on the rear, where they belong. Amtrak torments its sleeper passengers on western trains by putting sleepers up front, adjacent to the engines and all their noise and fumes.

It's a 60-degree, sunny, breezy morning, complete with palm trees. While we wait, three Tri-Rail trains call at West Palm, and a Greyhound bus leaves for points north. Brightline trains call at a different station on the Florida East Coast railroad a mile east. Soon, No. 98 appears, a minute early: two familiar P-42 engines, a baggage car, three Amfleet II coaches, an Amfleet dinette/lounge car, a Viewliner II diner, and three Viewliner sleepers. Two new Viewliner IIs sandwich our Viewliner I, #69011. The two generations are essentially indistinguishable externally.

A cheerful, chatty car attendant hops down, greets us by name, helps get our bags up into the car, and welcomes us aboard. It's approaching 10 AM and to my amazement the diner is open and still serving breakfast. I'm scooting up to sample "Flexible Dining." This is airline food, and not in a good way. It's hard to divine what Amtrak thinks is good about this food. It's what you would offer if you were trying to discourage repeat business.

Later, sitting in our Bedroom (A) watching orange groves fly by, we observe that the windows aren't as clean as they should be. Our car lady takes our lunch and dinner orders (so the one guy in the diner can pre-heat them.) and asks if we prefer to take them to our room or in the diner. I opt for the diner. Most sleeper customers opt for their rooms.

No one rides the Silver Meteor for the scenery or the "experience." The scenery consists of orange groves, farther north is the tunnel of trees where southern forests crowd in on the rails. In the far north, it's the NEC. And the "experience" is limited to the inherent civility of travel by rail: The food is awful, and the level and quality of onboard services reflects the luck of the draw of who your car attendant might be. Ours is excellent, but some are better than others.

At Orlando, I ventured one car forward to the diner for lunch. It is not a happy event. The car, with its complete galley all but unused, and staffed by a single employee, is almost deserted. Built with 48 seats in 12 booths, it now seats only 38, with one booth taken over for stores and one and a half removed altogether to afford wheelchair access to a table, but really used only for three self-service trash boxes.

The food is almost inedible my wife observes. "This is really unpleasant." It is served in a paper box, with the entrée in a round plastic dish with a cardboard cover, and a roll and tiny green salad separately wrapped. It produces more trash than food.

The exact same menu appears for dinner. The "Flexible Dining" dinner is worse than the lunch and is not helped by the free glass of bland wine served with a pour-it-yourself plastic wine glass.

We go to bed somewhere in South Carolina with the train running 45 minutes late. Overnight the CSX main gets worse, with long stretches of corrugated rail, bad surfacing, and rough turn outs. But we are spared the noise of the engines and the horns.

At 7:22am we stopped at Washington Union Station legally speaking on time. We hurried off the train. After changing to electric engines, the train is free to leave as soon as possible because this and all points north are "discharge only" stops.

The concrete platform is breaking up and very uneven. Inside WUS, the once bustling station is almost deserted. The restaurants and many of the shops are gone. We drop our bags in the equally deserted Acela lounge, and head off to the Dubliner, the restaurant in the nearby Phoenix Park hotel. A welcome real breakfast of actual cooked food.

**Day Two: The Capitol Limited** - We are back in the Acela lounge at 3:00pm to await departure of the Capitol Limited. The lounge has been refurbished and the seats are comfy, but the snack and beverage offerings are very basic. The lounge, like the station, is nearly deserted. Only five passengers were there at 3:05pm, and it turns out all of them are on our train due out at 4:05pm.

Around 3:20, an usher and a Redcap begin to collect people for the Capitol 's sleepers. At the platform I recognize the familiar red marker lights of a Superliner coach. I about choke when I get a look at the mighty Capitol Limited: it consists in its entirety of one P-42, one baggage car, ONE sleeper, a wretched Superliner Cross-Country café, and ONE coach.

Two revenue cars—is this a joke? Can there be any doubt that management is sabotaging these trains? We have more than a hundred passengers stuffed into those two cars, according to the conductor. How many more couldn't get seats or rooms?

The one food service car in the train epitomizes Amtrak's misunderstanding of its own customers and its own services. The car is a "Cross-Country Café"—one of a handful of 72-seat Superliner dining cars converted to a combo diner-and lounge car configuration but used mainly as a device to minimize on board labor cost and passenger services. The car operates with ten booths with 40 seats in the dining end, and four booths and 16 seats at the lounge end. A combined center snack bar faces the lounge end, and a serving station embracing the stairs and dumb waiters from the galley faces the dining end. Some of these cars are assigned only a single employee.

Amtrak's disdain for its passengers is best exemplified by the scripted all-train PA announcement repeated three or four times during the trip: "The lounge car is for on-site eating only. There is to be absolutely no hanging out or lounging about in the lounge car." At no time over the entire trip do either lounge car employees make any announcement promoting the purchase of food and beverages from the café or mentioning the hours of service.

On the other hand, no restriction is applied to coach passengers who might want to consume their airport-grade snack food "meals" at a dining booth. Sleeping car passengers are encouraged to take their "free" Flexible Dining "meals" in their rooms but are also free to use a booth in the café car. It is the only place on the Amtrak system where coach and sleeping car passengers might find themselves eating meals in each other's company.

The two-person crew working in this car are friendly and helpful but can only do so much. They make no effort to accost a few passengers who beat the system by buying a beverage and a bag of peanuts and nursing them along for an hour or more to allow enjoyment of the peaceful environment and sightseeing opportunities that the car affords. Sightseeing in the historically-significant and extremely scenic Potomac River Valley, however, is truncated by darkness on this January day—an hour out at Harper's Ferry - darkness overtakes us.

Dinner is the same inedible glop as on the Silver Meteor. I will wager that neither Stephen Gardner nor Board Chair Anthony Coscia has ever ridden this train or suffered eating these "meals."

At breakfast, we try the continental version: no fruit is available, but we get packaged oatmeal, yogurt, and a dry muffin, all on a par with a cheap budget motel on the highway. It too produces the now-familiar pile of waste packaging.

We arrived in Chicago about 25 minutes early. Bruce, our car attendant, carries all our bags out to the platform, and earns a good tip and our thanks. Chicago is cold, damp, and windy, so we cancel our planned walk through downtown in favor of reading in the spacious and nicely furnished Metropolitan Lounge. We do walk into the Loop for lunch at a real restaurant. Real food is a most welcome relief from "Flexible Dining."

The Metropolitan Lounge lady is the first and only Amtrak employee on the entire trip to ask to see our "ticket"—the QR code on our self-printed boarding pass. Conductors all seem to rely on their printed manifests for sleeper passengers.

**Day Three – The Empire Builder** - At 2:30pm the Empire Builder is called, still Amtrak's best train due out at 3:05pm. There are no ushers or guides for the Builder, where passengers for the California Zephyr and Southwest Chief get escorts, even though their gates are basically around the corner from the lounge. We got the lounge lady barking at passengers about where to stand and then where to go for the Empire Builder's Northside gate. If you didn't already know where it was, it would be a challenge to find.

But when we get to track 17, the train is spotted but the crew isn't ready to board anyone. So, we stood in place for nearly 15 minutes. Our car is the one Portland sleeper, the last car on the train, hence the closest to the gate. Unlike the pathetic Capitol Limited, this feels like a real train, with three locomotives (two new but cold-challenged ALC-42s), baggage car, crew dorm, one Seattle sleeper, diner, one Seattle coach, Sightseer lounge, two Portland coaches and the one Portland sleeper. We get the short walk at Chicago, offset by a very long, cold walk at St. Paul.

At about 6:00pm we head off for restored Traditional Dining, as close as Amtrak gets to a decent meal. Tables are covered in institutional grade but attractive white linens with navy blue cloth napkins and real stainless cutlery. A beautiful bouquet of fresh flowers is at each table. Our "one free wine with dinner" comes in an actual drinking glass, but the water arrives in plastic cups. The food is served on Amtrak's inexhaustible supply of plastic picnic plates. The Traditional Dining food is not cooked on board but still is actually pretty good, something that is a profound change from the last two days of airplane food. The dinner menu offers steak, salmon, chicken, and rigatoni, plus a starter and a dessert. They will add a small salad, but only if you remember to ask for one.

We get into a conversation with the very accommodating Lounge Service Assistant about why the menu fails to note whether any items are, or can be made, gluten free. She understands the problem but has no answer. At that very moment, up from the galley appears "Chef Randy". Randy comes over to our table and we had a long and most interesting chat about Amtrak's foodservice program. But no answer on gluten, and he doesn't have reliable ingredient labels to help him. Randy later notified me Amtrak's spring menu revision may have some meals labeled "gluten friendly."

When will coach passengers be allowed to buy meals in the diner? The answer is they can barely staff the diners to feed the sleeping car passengers and would be swamped with even a few coach diners. Hmmm... But they add that there is only one Seattle sleeper and one Seattle coach for the same reason: insufficient staffing. That doesn't explain the solo coach, because Amtrak routinely makes one coach attendant responsible for two cars.

The busiest rail junction in Minnesota catches us with a red signal just east of St. Paul Depot. It's a freight train slowly clearing the junction. Ten minutes later, we stop at St. Paul, about 12 minutes late.

The trip has come to a successful and satisfying conclusion, with the one major exception of Amtrak's sorry "Flexible Dining" fiasco. "Flexible" seems calculated to drive people away and deter repeat business. Otherwise, almost all the employees we encountered were warm, helpful, and upbeat. The two station lounges were comfortable, if a bit Spartan in the refreshments offered. The tone of the entire trip was civilized and relaxing, in sharp contrast to the airports on the trip down. We would cheerfully do it again, but we would figure out how to pack a high-quality picnic dinner to carry onto the train ourselves on the eastern trains.

The few problems we encountered are easily remedied and easily within management's span of control and budget. Windows can be washed more thoroughly, the lounges upgraded one notch, and the on-board food universally upgraded to the restored Traditional Dining that is being well-implemented and well-received on most western trains. The inter-regional trains as a group contribute (when Amtrak can be bothered to run full consists) \$400 million or more in annual positive free cash flow. Amtrak should put a bit of that back into its foodservice.

### **WisARP Board of Directors Secretary Position Open** by Susan Foote-Martin

The Wisconsin Association of Rail Passengers leads Wisconsin in promoting a statewide passenger rail network. Since 1977, WisARP has been involved in planning, advocating and educating the public on the need for more passenger rail.

We are currently looking for a person to serve in the position of Secretary on the Board of Directors. Board meetings are held quarterly but additional meetings may be called to perform the business of the organization. There are two general membership meetings held each year, located in different regions of the state.

- Duties of the Secretary include keeping the minutes of the Board of Director meetings
- Provide notices to agencies as required
- Keep and maintain membership lists

Also, it is not mandatory for the position but it is preferred for a person with a like-minded desire for growth of passenger rail within the State of Wisconsin to fill this open position.

WisARP is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization which has a statewide membership of about 700.

If you are interested in the position of Secretary of the WisARP Board of Directors, please send a letter of intent to either [BadgerRails@gmail.com](mailto:BadgerRails@gmail.com) or WisARP Secretary, 6016 N Elm Tree Rd, Glendale, WI 53217.

This position is open to both members and non-members of WisARP. However, applicants must be members of WisARP at the time of beginning service as Secretary.

*editor fill...* **Amtrak published [survey findings](#) August 7, 2023**, demonstrating strong support from American voters for continued passenger rail investments, including infrastructure renewal and service expansion. Amtrak commissioned the work by the Mellman Group and surveyed 1,000 registered U.S. voters. [https://media.amtrak.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Passenger-Rail-Survey\\_Executive-Summary.pdf](https://media.amtrak.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Passenger-Rail-Survey_Executive-Summary.pdf)

**Las Vegas Throws Money Into a Hole.** Some true believers on the Las Vegas City Council have gone all in on plans for the Boring Company's Tesla tunnels - 68 miles worth.. <https://arstechnica.com/cars/2023/08/musks-boring-company-gets-ok-to-dig-68-miles-of-tunnels-under-las-vegas/>

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**First class**



Empire Builder westbound in Racine

Al Baker Photo

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