

ALL ABOARD MINNESOTA



MIPRC CONFERENCE OBSERVATIONS

By Brian Nelson, President - All Aboard Minnesota

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. Below is a summary of observations and information learned. These observations and any opinions in this report 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 initiatives going on in several states to possibly expand passenger rail corridors in the upper Mid-west. It's a very exciting time for passenger rail expansion!

FRA Overview Amit Bose, Administrator for the FRA, made an appearance at MIPRC Annual Meeting and 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, 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 route to increase this train running to daily, but Indiana has not joined. They stated they need a formal invite to do so, and one meeting attendee strongly criticized Indiana officials over their failure to join. The Indiana state DOT has about 3,300 employees, and of that total there are 22 are multi-modal personnel with only three dedicated to 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.

Kansas- plans to expand the Heartland Flyer from Newton to Oklahoma City connecting Wichita. An announcement is due anytime now from Kansas DOT on this initiative. The plan will be implemented in 23. Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas have submitted Expression of Interest letters already to FRA.

Michigan – This state has three main corridors: Pere Marquette (to Grand Rapids), Blue Water (traveling through Kalamazoo 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. Long term plan is to extend the Wolverine to Windsor, Ontario.

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 an \$196.5M ARRA grant for the line, and \$6.5M SOGR grant for grade crossing, gates and bridges. Ridership of 598k in all three corridors this year is almost pre-covid levels. They want to establish new service from Detroit to Toledo and Cleveland for better eastern connections and build a new station in Detroit.

Minnesota - Dan Krom, Director of the Passenger Rail Office for MnDOT, gave our states' update. The main corridor focus for the new MN state rail plan is the Northern Lights Express from the Twin Cities to Duluth (NLX) extending the second daily Twin Cities to Chicago train to Fargo, ND on a daytime schedule through St. Cloud, 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. MnDOT is also supportive of a restored North Coast Hiawatha/Limited.

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 second train planning and implementation, and MnDOT plans to submit letters of interest to the FRA for all corridors next month.

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-KS 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 indicated Intercity Passenger Rail is one issue he favors.

Wisconsin - The Hiawatha trains generated over 880k riders in 2019 with 85 percent fare-box recovery and 90 percent On-Time Performance. (OTP) I noted new bus lines to connect trains, especially the 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.

Missouri- River Runner route had 176k riders this year. The Kansas City, St. Louis to Chicago run through began May 22, and ridership is 80% pre-covid. They want to get the 2x daily trip back on asap, maybe in Dec 2022. Expand service 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, \$22M in tax revenue. Missouri DOT is very supportive of the new TC-KS passenger corridor. They also want to accommodate bikes, with a new pilot program to begin next year.

North Dakota – gave an overview of Empire Builder service in the state and its importance, along with stated support for the restoration of the North Coast Hiawatha/Limited. No new corridors are planned.

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

FRA has established the Corridor ID Program which can be 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 session- 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 new routes/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 5 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's), Host freight railroads, Onboard Amtrak Employee organizations, Regional Passenger Rail Authorities, Tribes, and Organizations Representing Amtrak Passengers. My perception is that this program is just getting started.

New Siemens Produced 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.

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.

Chicago Union Station - lots of platform work for ADA and better accessibility overall. Will revitalize and use the old mail platform for passengers. There will better North/South traffic flow and a new track connection will be built between CUS and the air line which will increase traffic flow and congestion into and out of the station. Plan is also to use the two run through tracks more efficiently. Planning for huge increases of service throughout the Mid-west and to accommodate that efficiently.

Note on attendees - This meeting was very well attended including administrators and staff from the FRA, State DOT commissioners, assorted politicians and advocacy groups from most of the states.

Kevin Roggenbuck attended representing Ramsey County MN and GRRC.

Approximately 10 Amtrak managers attended.

Some notable connections -

Arun Rao, formerly the Passenger Rail Manager for WisDOT, is now Amtrak's Corridor ID person. He's in command of 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. He stated it's still Amtrak's plan to run the second daily train to Duluth and back.

Bob Johnston, Trains Magazine columnist frequently writing about Amtrak, expressed concern about Amtrak's operational 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 Trains issue he wrote an extensive article on VIA. Said they are a "total mess."

Mason Baxter with the Association for Innovative Passenger Rail Operations. I have not heard of this organization personally, but basically 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 will bring up the topic of passenger trains on that route.