



Passenger Rail Needs Assessment

Overview of Needs Analysis

There is one passenger rail route in GVMC's planning area—the *Pere Marquette*, which runs roundtrip between Grand Rapids and Chicago seven days a week. Passenger rail service is provided by the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak), which began service on May 1, 1971. The *Pere Marquette* began service in Michigan on August 5, 1984. This route has been running with new locomotives since 2017, and MDOT is currently working with Amtrak to implement new passenger cars. The cars are still being delivered to various Midwest services throughout the next year or two, including the *Pere Marquette*.

Process for Determining and Addressing Needs

Local passenger rail issues are monitored by the Westrain Collaborative, a group of agencies working to identify passenger rail service issues in West Michigan (see member list at right). However, other groups also work to improve passenger rail in Michigan and throughout the country. The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI) is a cooperative effort between Amtrak, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), and nine states, including Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin, to develop an improved and expanded passenger rail system in the Midwest. GVMC has also integrated public feedback about passenger rail issues that we received through our Transportation Issues Public Survey that was conducted in late summer through the fall of 2022 into this passenger rail needs discussion. The survey received 1,109 responses, and over 100 participants contributed comments about passenger rail improvements they'd like to see. Identified needs listed below are the culmination of work from Westrain, the MWRRI, the Coast-to-Coast Study team, Amtrak, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and MDOT, with an additional section showing public support for these initiatives as well as the public's additional recommendations for future improvements.

Agencies Represented on the Passenger Rail (WESTRAIN) Committee:

Amtrak
City of Bangor
Grand Valley Metro Council
Historic Pullman Foundation
The Macatawa Area Coordinating Council
Michigan Association of Railroad
Passengers (MARP)
Michigan Department of Transportation
Office of Rail
Quandel Consultants
The Rapid
Sharp Marketing
Southwest Michigan Planning Commission
Strategic Leadership Council

Identified Needs

Need 1: Currently, the primary established passenger rail need is linking to the high-speed rail network and creating greater rail access to other parts of the state and the Midwest.

WESTRAIN is working to generate grassroots local government support for Amtrak's strategic vision for expansion. To that end, they are producing a video to explain some aspects of the vision and how local government can get engaged. The state has weighed in with its support, and Westrain seeks to show the state that there is also considerable local support for Amtrak's vision as well.

There are currently three recommendations to address this need:

(A) Establishment of a Rail Connection in New Buffalo

The Westrain Collaborative supports building a rail connection in New Buffalo that would connect CSX tracks to Amtrak tracks which would allow *Pere Marquette* trains to operate on Amtrak-owned 100 mph service tracks between New Buffalo and Porter, Indiana, where the service would continue to Chicago. This new connection will allow the *Pere Marquette* passengers to switch to the *Wolverine/Blue Water* services to reach points east in Michigan and west to Chicago and for the *Wolverine/Blue Water* passengers to access destinations along Michigan's west coast to Grand Rapids.

Current plans include two short-term objectives:

1. Work with MDOT and Amtrak to establish a second train on current routing between Grand Rapids/Holland and Chicago
2. Investigate options (funding and administrative) to begin West Michigan Express (WMX) service between Holland and Grand Rapids

(B) Re-Establish Passenger Rail Service between Detroit and Holland (Coast-to-Coast)

In late 2016, a feasibility study known as the Coast-to-Coast initiative concluded that the re-establishment of rail passenger service between Detroit, Lansing, Grand Rapids, and Holland is a concept worth pursuing. The study examined three different rail routes from Detroit to Holland via Lansing and Grand Rapids that could be established by upgrading existing rail. The first route passes through Ann Arbor and Jackson; the second passes through Ann Arbor and Howell; and the third bypasses Ann Arbor, heading from Wayne to Howell. The study concluded that the routes that pass through Ann Arbor are viable options that merit further study. The route through Jackson showed the greatest potential ridership and revenue, while the route through Ann Arbor and Howell promised the greatest return on investment. The study also looked at the cost of establishing basic, 79-mph service on the route through Ann Arbor and Howell and 110-mph service. While the 110-mph service would require greater capital investment, it would yield higher ridership. GVMC will participate in any updates undertaken for this study.

(C) Work Toward Achieving Vision of Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI)

The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI) is a cooperative effort between Amtrak, the FRA, and nine states—Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin—to develop an improved and expanded passenger rail system in the Midwest. In September 2004, MWRRI released a report conducted by their consultant, Transportation Economics & Management Systems, Inc., which outlines a new vision for passenger rail travel in the Midwest. US FRA published its [Midwest Regional Rail Plan](#) in late 2021. Additionally, MDOT continues to be engaged in region-wide planning through the [Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission](#).

This vision is a transportation plan known as the Midwest Regional Rail System (MWRRS), a 3,000-mile rail network serving nearly 60 million people. MWRRS would operate as a hub-and-spoke system providing through-service in Chicago to locations throughout the Midwest. Trains operating at speeds up to 110 mph would link Chicago with Milwaukee, Madison and Minneapolis; Des Moines and Omaha; St. Louis and Kansas City; Indianapolis and Cincinnati; Grand Rapids and Detroit; Toledo and Cleveland; as well as many smaller cities and towns. Increased speeds and service efficiencies would reduce travel times dramatically. The Chicago-Detroit trip, for example, would drop from the current five hours, thirty-six minutes to less than four, Chicago-Twin Cities from the current eight plus to less than six, and St. Louis-Kansas City from five hours and 40 minutes to just over four hours. The nearly eight-plus-hour Chicago-Cincinnati trip would be cut in half.

Rail passenger service from between Grand Rapids and Chicago could be routed through Kalamazoo. This service could begin in Holland, operate to Grand Rapids and then to Kalamazoo. This would provide improved access to the Accelerated Rail Service both east and west out of Kalamazoo, providing additional higher speed connections from Grand Rapids and Holland. This routing could also support local efforts to establish commuter rail service between Holland and Grand Rapids and is being evaluated by the West Michigan Express (WMX) Task Force. The route to Kalamazoo could replace or supplement the current *Pere Marquette* service from GR/Holland to Chicago. There may be opportunities to partner with the Gun Lake Tribe developments south of Wayland.

Need 2: More, and better, passenger rail options that are accessible, convenient, efficient, fast, frequent, and reliable and that will have the benefits of reduced congestion and improved air quality, especially at the local level.

This need is derived from data and public comments from our recent Transportation Issues survey. The survey demonstrated wide public interest in increasing options to travel by rail, thereby showing either direct or indirect support for the initiatives above like implementing the Coast-to-Coast rail network, working to achieve the MWRRI vision, connecting to high-speed rail, expanding Amtrak passenger rail service to support travel to additional destinations, and making targeted investments in our rail system. Public comments also demonstrated significant interest in making rail improvements at the local level, with many comments pertaining to developing light commuter rail from downtown Grand Rapids to surrounding communities and beyond.

Additionally, when the public was asked to rank the convenience of the Amtrak schedule on a scale of one to five though our Transportation Issues survey, with one being very poor and five being very good, the public gave it a

“poor” rating, with a 2.47 weighted average. This score was the lowest of all evaluated modes. Based on this, as well as public comments received through the survey, there is significant support for improvements to, or expansion of, the Amtrak schedule.

Public survey comments trended toward the following improvements:

- (A) Investigating, planning for, developing, and then prioritizing light rail infrastructure (trains, trolleys/streetcars, etc.) and networks, especially through downtown and to surrounding areas for commuters, to the GRFIA Airport, to the Lake Michigan Lakeshore, or to Traverse City
- (B) Electrifying the passenger rail system and incorporating new rail transportation technology
- (C) Expanding Amtrak service to reach other areas across the state and increasing schedule frequency
- (D) Improving Amtrak connections to public transit (the train arrives early and departs late so bus service is minimal)
- (E) Improving lighting at the Amtrak station as well as Amtrak tracks and signals
- (F) Investing in/connecting to high-speed rail for long-distance travel
- (G) Supporting the West Michigan Express
- (H) Replacing highways (such as US-131 and I-96) with rail lines supported by bus service, dedicated bike lanes, and pedestrian walkways and spaces

Costs to Address the Recommendations and Future Steps

There is no exact dollar amount to address these recommendations. They are currently all unfunded, and if work were to resume, funding would likely come from a variety of sources.

The first step in establishing a New Buffalo connection is a feasibility and engineering study, and the next step toward developing Coast-to-Coast passenger rail service is a full feasibility study to include environmental impact analyses, an implementation plan, and a review of public-private partnership options. Both studies are currently unfunded.

As of 2019, the MWRRP is still an active initiative. The funding plan consists of a mix of funding sources, including federal loans and grants, state funding, general funds, and capital and revenue generated from system-related activities, such as joint development proceeds. Federal funding will be the primary source of capital funds. MWRRP funding is based on the establishment of an 80/20 federal/state funding program like those that already exist for highways; implementation will remain the responsibility of the states.

Some states are making progress toward service improvements identified in the MWRRP, including Michigan. MDOT purchased and upgraded the 135-mile Kalamazoo-Dearborn corridor through FRA’s High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail Grant Program. MDOT has since been working through a variety of FRA’s discretionary grant programs to further upgrade the line and keep it in a state of good repair. Additionally, MDOT applied to [FRA’s Corridor Identification and Development Program](#) for each of the three existing passenger rail routes in Michigan. While MDOT has not heard if the *Pere Marquette* has been accepted, some primary outcomes of this program would be a Service Development Plan, which would help identify projects for increased reliability and frequencies, and insertion of these projects into FRA’s pipeline for future capital funding.

Recommendations from the needs analysis conducted for the GVMC MTP include encouraging MDOT and the Federal Railroad Administration to conduct a more detailed study, alternative analysis, economic and environmental impact analysis for rail passenger service options in West Michigan. This study should include routes between Holland/Grand Rapids and Chicago and Holland/Grand Rapids and Detroit/Toledo. This could result in more than one rail passenger route to/from West Michigan and could support future WMX Holland to Grand Rapids plans. This recommendation is consistent with the Michigan State Rail Plan recommended investment package of improvements.

Potential Future Issues and Plans Include:

1. Work with MDOT on potential New Buffalo to Traverse City Study, as noted in the FY23 boilerplate language and how it could incorporate other rail passenger needs in the GVMC area.
2. Evaluate findings and recommendations from MDOT’s long range plan ([MM2045](#)) and State Rail Plan Supplement ([SRP supplement](#)), as they may apply to GVMC on this subject.
3. Evaluate future options to retain and enhance rail passenger service to and from the GVMC MPO area, in coordination with MDOT and local stakeholders.