

Passenger Rail Needs

WESTRAIN

Passenger rail issues are currently being monitored by the WESTRAIN Collaborative. The WESTRAIN Collaborative is a group of agencies working to identify passenger rail service issues in West Michigan. Participants include the Michigan Department of Transportation, the Grand Valley Metropolitan Council, the Macatawa Area Coordinating Council, Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers (MARP), the Cornerstone Chamber of Commerce, Sharp Marketing, the City of Bangor, the Rapid, Van Buren County Public Transit, and the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. The focus of WESTRAIN is to secure and maintain passenger rail service from Grand Rapids to communities along the Pere Marquette line to Chicago, Illinois, and beyond. The WESTRAIN Collaborative has also worked closely with Amtrak on a number of initiatives to increase awareness of and traffic on the Pere Marquette rail line. Utilizing special promotions, giveaways, and other marketing strategies, WESTRAIN serves to continue to help attract new riders to the passenger rail experience.

WESTRAIN 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 on to Chicago. This new connection will allow the *Pere Marquette* passengers to switch to the *Wolverine/Blue Water* services to access points east in Michigan and west to Chicago and for *Wolverine/Blue Water* passengers to access destinations along Michigan's west coast to Grand Rapids. The first step is a feasibility and engineering study that is currently unfunded.

It is also worth noting that because the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (described below) shows significant change to the current Amtrak service between Holland/Grand Rapids and Chicago, routing the service via Kalamazoo. Under this scenario, the *Pere Marquette* line south of Holland may be eliminated, including the St. Joseph and Bangor passenger rail stations. WESTRAIN supports continued intercity passenger rail service by Amtrak at the existing *Pere Marquette* Amtrak station communities linking Chicago, St. Joseph, Bangor, Holland, and Grand Rapids.

Midwest Regional Rail Initiative

The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI) is a cooperative effort between Amtrak, the Federal Railroad Administration (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. 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, 40 minutes to just over four hours. The nearly eight-plus-hour Chicago-Cincinnati trip would be cut in half. The total capital investment for the MWRRS, including infrastructure and rolling stock, is estimated to be \$7.7 billion (in 2002 dollars). The rolling stock for the entire system will cost approximately \$1.1 billion. Infrastructure improvements required to implement the MWRRS are estimated to cost \$6.6 billion, or about \$2 million per mile. This compares favorably with typical highway costs of \$10 million per mile. 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. MWRRS funding is based on the establishment of an 80/20 federal/state funding program similar to those that already exist for highways; implementation will remain the responsibility of the states. The State of Michigan would contribute \$873 million for infrastructure and \$234 million for train equipment. As of 2019, the MWRRI is still an active initiative. However, most recently, states have been focused on completing work that has been awarded through FRA's High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail Grant Program.

As noted in the previous section, rail passenger service from between Grand Rapids and Chicago would 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.

Coast-to-Coast Initiative

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 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 establishing 110-mph service. While the 110-mph service would require greater capital investment, it would yield higher ridership that would allow the service to potentially recover its operating costs. The next major step toward establishing 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. These next steps are currently unfunded.

Recommendation

Encourage MDOT with the FRA 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.

This recommendation is consistent with the Michigan State Rail Plan, Recommended Investment Package of improvements.