

Midwest Coalition Releases Corridor Blueprint

The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MRR) draft executive report of August 31 recommends a network of faster, more frequent passenger trains centered on Chicago. The MRR is made up of nine states (Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio), Amtrak, and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).

The report concludes that of three service scenarios, the "moderate" one (in terms of speed and frequency) was preferable, in that it "yields a positive operating cost ratio, provides the best value for money in terms of revenue generated per dollar invested, and generates a system-wide revenue surplus shortly after completion of the system."

This option involves diesel-multiple-units (dmu's) running at a top speed of 110 mph. They would be similar to the IC3 Flexliner that toured parts of the US in the past two years, and similar to trains on order by Pennsylvania (Apr. '97 News).

Network Characteristics

As shown below, the report examined a 3000-mile network in parts of nine states. Eighty percent of the region's population would be within an hour's drive of the rail network or the planned feeder-bus network. Of course, route designations are not final, but can change as states' plans change. Frequencies would increase dramatically (see chart, p. 2). Total train-miles for the network would be 15 million annually—nearly half Amtrak's current national annual total.

Travel times would drop significantly, due to better rolling

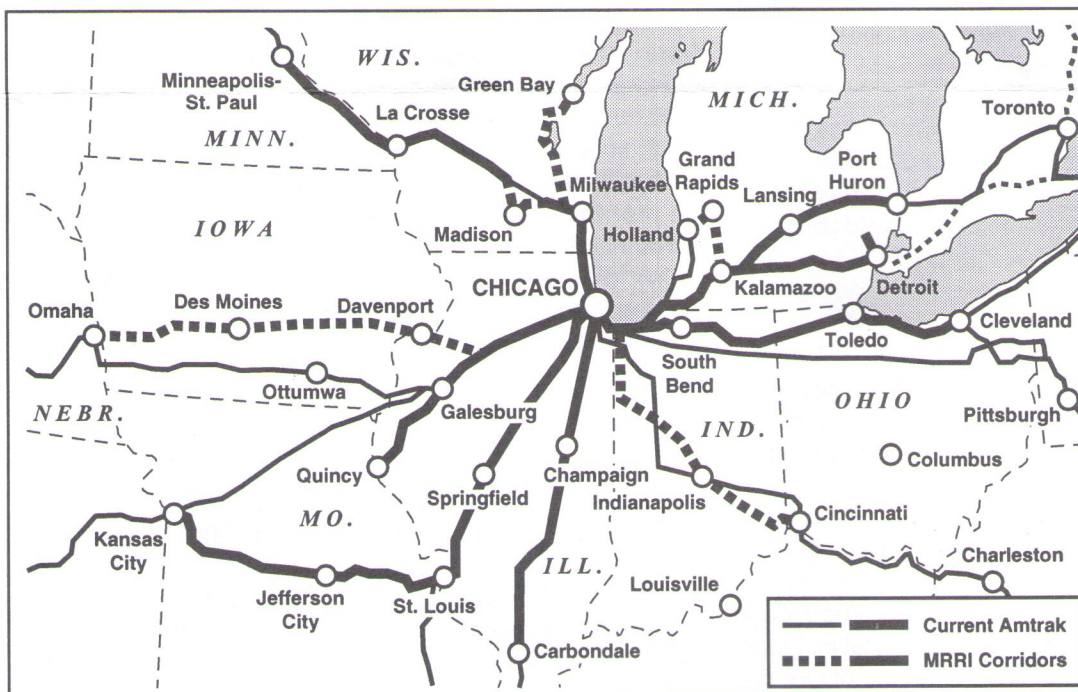
"As the region continues to grow, traffic congestion on area roadways will only worsen. Having a rail network to supplement our existing airports and roads makes sound economic sense...The vision outlined in the study fits well with Amtrak's business plan to develop a network of rail passenger corridors that are market-driven, commercially viable and contribute positively to Amtrak's bottom-line."

—Amtrak Intercity President Lee W. Bullock, in August 31 statement about the MRR report

stock, track, grade crossings, and signals (along the lines of signal projects already under way in Illinois and Michigan; Feb. '98, Sept. '96 News). For example, Chicago-Cincinnati would decrease 50%; Chicago-Milwaukee 30% (see Sept. '97 News for study of 110-mph service on that line).

Capital costs would be \$3.5 billion (1997 dollars). Of that, \$470 million is for a 328-car fleet, assembled in the Midwest. Rolling stock would be the same on all corridors to keep per-unit production costs down. The other \$3 billion is for infrastructure investment, about \$1 million per mile for 3000 miles. The report notes that is less than the \$6-10 million cost for a 150-mph high-speed train service, or \$5-10 million for a rural interstate highway, or \$10-20 million for an urban freeway.

(continued on page 2)



MRR REPORT MAP

The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative draft executive report released August 31 is a preliminary evaluation of 11 routes (and segments thereof) radiating out from Chicago. The report segments shown here are not meant to imply they are the "final" proposal. Some Amtrak segments (like the *California Zephyr* between Galesburg and Omaha) may well retain their current long-distance train service, even if all the proposals in the report are implemented.

Further study may lead to changes in some routes shown here.

The report also is not meant to preclude other ideas that are active, but not shown here, like Cleveland-Columbus (July News).

—Scott Leonard

Midwest Network

(from page 1)

Ridership is projected at 8 million annually, four times higher than projections for adding no service. By 2010, the network would generate \$471 million in annual revenues, with \$347 million in annual operating costs. The difference would be used to recover the initial investments made by the states and to maintain and expand the system.

Using the same criteria as the FRA did in its 1997 study *High-Speed Ground Transportation in America* (Jan. '98, Sept. '96 *News*), the report finds that the network provides a net benefit-to-cost ratio of 1.8—including things like reduced emissions and air and road congestion.

Parts of the new system could start running in 2003, with full implementation in 2006.

The report consulting team was led by Transportation Economics and Management Systems, Inc., of Frederick, MD. Part of the financing came from a planning grant from the FRA under the Next Generation High Speed Rail Program. Unfortunately, neither 1999 transportation appropriations bills (going to conference committee in September) includes funds for the FRA to continue studying the MRRI.

Next Steps

The nine states now must agree to endorse the report's findings and finalize an implementation plan. Freight railroads must be brought in. Funding must be secured. The report would split the cost between the federal government (80% of total, mostly for infrastructure) and states (20% of total, mostly for rolling stock, using state bonds).

The federal-match concept is used for other transportation modes. However, Congress has failed three times (1991, 1995, 1998) to extend that concept to intercity passenger rail. Most recently, in the lead-up to TEA-21 passage (May '98 *News*), six of the nine MRRI governors (all but Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois) signed a letter to Congress urging such action (July '98 *News*). Other possibilities include annual federal appropriations (made more difficult by TEA-21's insulating of highway and aviation funding) and the new \$3.5 billion rail loan guarantee program in TEA-21. It is also possible that some Amtrak "TRA" funds (Mar. *News*) will be discussed as seed money to leverage other funding.

"This is a much larger scope than any of us has ever envisioned...This calls for high-speed rail service along 3000 miles and takes in virtually every city in the Midwest. And their study shows it's doable."

—Kevin Brubaker, high-speed rail manager, Environmental Law and Policy Center of the Midwest, Detroit News, Sept. 1

Grass-roots support will help. Midwestern NARP members should tell their state and federal legislators they support the general MRRI concept (keeping in mind that many details are still to be worked out). Others also should let their federal legislators know they support the concept.

Past Attempts

The MRRI is not the first such multi-state attempt. The United States Railway Association (USRA), in its advisory role in dealing with Penn Central problems, in 1975 proposed a passenger train network for the northeastern US that included improving services in the Midwest south and east of Detroit,

SELECTED MRRI FREQUENCY CHANGES

Daily Round-Trips from Chicago (except Kansas City)

	Existing	Plan
Green Bay	0	4
Milwaukee	6	14
St. Paul	1	6
Omaha	1	4
St. Louis-Kansas City	2	4
St. Louis	3	10
Carbondale	2	6
Cincinnati	less than 1	5
Cleveland	2	8
Detroit	3	10

Milwaukee, and St. Louis (Mar. '75 *News*). There was no funding mechanism, and little interest on the part of states concerned about freight line abandonments. [However, the USRA proposal for 150-mph service on the Northeast Corridor will finally happen in 1999, 24 years later.]

Another was the Illinois-Indiana-Michigan-Ohio-Pennsylvania High Speed Rail Compact report (Sept. '89 *News*), for a network of 60-90 mph corridors. Like MRRI, the 1989 report called for reliable federal funding to help pay for the proposal, little of which ever came through. However, the 1989 effort probably was a helpful step toward coordinated state-federal (FRA and Amtrak) efforts to improve the Chicago-Detroit and Chicago-St. Louis lines, toward individual state DOT studies in the Midwest, and toward the MRRI effort itself. ■

GEORGIA STATION IN DANGER

One of Georgia's historic rail stations, in downtown Decatur (10 miles east of Atlanta) is in danger. The former Georgia Railroad station (1891) houses "The Freight Room," a railroad-theme restaurant and bluegrass music hall. Owner CSX is not interested in badly needed roof and eaves repairs, and wants to raze the structure—but needs city approval because it's a historic building. The city has cited the building for numerous code violations. The tenant-restaurant owner has been paying for all repairs from his business proceeds. However, over \$100,000 is needed to meet all city codes.

If it survives, the Decatur station will be a key stop in the future metro Atlanta commuter rail system. It is also the monthly meeting place for the Georgia Association of Railroad Passengers. GARP asks that anyone interesting in contributing to the effort to save the station contact the Save Decatur's Station Fund, c/o Bob Kane, 1464 Winston Pl., Decatur, GA 30033-1955, 404/874-1708.

FIFTY YEARS OF TEXAS EAGLE

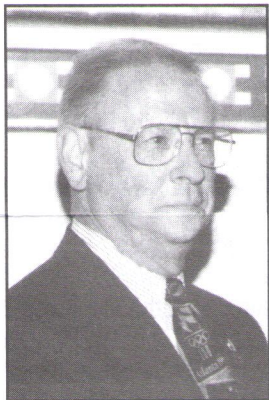
The Age of Steam Railroad Museum will sponsor an exhibit at the State Fair of Texas in Dallas October 1-7 saluting 50 years of service of Missouri Pacific and Amtrak's *Texas Eagle*. There will be a set of Amtrak Superliner equipment and a car from the 1948 train on display. Call 214/428-0101, or visit web site <<http://www.startext.net/homes/railroad>>.

“Whither Amtrak”

This column by NARP President John R. Martin appeared in the September Trains magazine, reprinted here with permission.

From the perspective of the National Association of Railroad Passengers (NARP), Amtrak has made significant progress in the last year.

Ridership and revenues are up and growing. There is more service; management is more attentive to opportunities. Service standards are being developed to provide the service consistency Amtrak has never had. Positive signs, but there is a long way to go.



John R. Martin

Major questions affecting Amtrak's relationships with the railroads have been resolved, although Union Pacific's problems remain disquieting. Amtrak's express initiative has been endorsed by the Surface Transportation Board. Access to Portland, Maine, seems assured; startup may come in 1999. Other new or expanded services are being considered. Amtrak has a new source of substantial capital funding. It soon will have a new Board of Directors, and presumably, a new president.

Key committee members of Congress, however, still fail to embrace the benefits of rail passenger service and the progress at Amtrak. Accordingly, Amtrak continues to face funding threats, though political support is growing. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, accepting the American Passenger Rail Coalition (APRC) Rail Leadership Award June 4 in Washington Union Station, said, "a national rail passenger system is an important component of a good transportation system. We're going to need trains more and more in the future".

Currently, there is no recognized definition of a "national rail passenger system." We need to develop one. A starting point would be, "A network of interconnected rail and complementary intermodal services, serving the primary metropolitan statistical areas, and other urban and rural regions of the 48 contiguous states, including long-distance and multiple frequency corridor rail services."

The definition can be debated, but a truly national rail passenger system must be Amtrak's goal and the key to its vision for the future.

Whatever the definition, Amtrak must move in exciting, aggressive, consumer- and market-oriented ways to become an ever-increasing factor in the movement of people. Moving more people each year at a declining cost per person to the taxpayer is defensible—and salable. That will require of Amtrak bold steps to expand service while building the markets it serves, improving the quality of its service, and reaching new markets under a specific plan for growth. Identify the dollars needed and the benefits that will result—a definitive plan.

Great! But where do we start? Here are some ideas!

- Get back into Phoenix. Propose a partnership with the city, Arizona, and Union Pacific. Press ahead with plans to make the *Texas Eagle* daily, providing Phoenix, Tucson, El Paso, San Antonio, Austin, Fort Worth, Dallas, Little Rock—and let's not forget Longview, Marshall, Mineola and others—

with daily service.

- Implement plans to add service to the east coast of Florida without reducing service to other Florida cities. Finalize plans to return to Oklahoma. Restore Florida service to the Midwest, and the routes of the *Desert Wind* and the Pioneer. Add other new services, such as a train between Denver and Texas.

- Amtrak's unprecedented capital budget must be used to increase capacity. Start by rebuilding the Santa Fe Hi-Levels. Rebuild more 10-6 sleepers for dorms for Superliner trains, then use transition sleepers to generate revenue. Order more Superliners and Viewliner sleepers. Develop a new low-level long distance coach. As American Flyer sets enter service in the Northeast Corridor next year, rebuild some Amfleet cars into an interim generation of long-distance coaches to provide capacity for the east coast of Florida, to add capacity to other trains, and to add new trains.

- Trainline all express boxcars so they may be carried at the head-end. Amtrak said the express business would not compromise Amtrak's primary purpose, moving people. Indications are it has. Express business may be critical to survival. So are the passengers. Do it right.

- Serve the passengers! Do whatever is necessary to give passengers consistent service. Don't let different operational objectives, personnel changes, and isolated bottom lines penalize your customers.

- Develop partnerships with the railroads. Amtrak's recent agreements with CSX and NS should be the model for nationwide cooperation between Amtrak and the freight railroads. Whether a change of heart or political reality, these new attitudes by freight railroads should be the foundation for even greater cooperation.

Without question, Americans want an improved national rail passenger system. More of our leaders recognize that. Amtrak must make it happen! NARP can help, and we have countless ideas. We also have a new Amtrak travel discount, sure to build membership and make us more effective. But bold, aggressive, new leadership from the Amtrak board and new president are imperative! They must build and tell the story—and they must do it now! ■

FOLLOW-UP: RAIL CAR STRUCTURE

In discussing differing European and US safety standards for passenger rail-car construction, the tougher US "buff loading" or "end loading" requirements are often cited. These are a car structure's ability to withstand longitudinal forces applied at a point behind the coupler. In fact, this strength (normally 800,000 lbs. in the US, about half that in Europe) generally is achieved by taking advantage of the entire car structure, including side and roof members, as a unit. Thus, in an accident (such as in Germany on June 3, *June News*), US design likely would have resulted in reduced carbody destruction and consequent fatalities and injuries.

This is not to suggest that all fatalities could have been avoided, especially with an overhead bridge collapsing on the train. A car that could maintain integrity while striking a bridge abutment at 125 mph would be too heavy for commercial use. It could not prevent the G-forces of a near-instantaneous deceleration, forces which likely would cause fatalities.

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Texas Eagle—new schedule August 30 in both directions. An *earlier* southbound schedule (depart Chicago 5:55 pm—35 minutes earlier; arrive San Antonio 11:59 pm—83 minutes earlier) aims to restore more marketable times at St. Louis/Austin/San Antonio. (The Chicago-to-San Antonio running-time is cut 48 minutes but remains 9 minutes slower than in June, 1995.) A *later* northbound schedule (depart San Antonio 8 am; arrive Chicago 2:45 pm) aims to improve reliability in light of continuing Union Pacific delays between Los Angeles and Texas.

[For simplicity, Amtrak is setting back the present St. Louis-to-Chicago departure from 6:59 am to 9 am seven days a week (i.e., including the three “non-Texas” days).]

This breaks *Eagle-to-Empire Builder* and *-California Zephyr* connections at Chicago. On six July days, an average 8.5 passengers a trip connected to the *Builder*; three to the *Zephyr*. Amtrak knows about these high-revenue passengers and is running a Springfield-Galesburg van for passengers connecting from the *Eagle* (on days it runs south of St. Louis) to the *Zephyr*. A longer highway connection to Columbus, WI, to connect with the *Empire Builder* is being considered. However, that will be complicated by a plan to have the westbound *Empire Builder* run 45 minutes earlier with the fall timetable change. (St. Louis-north passengers still can make the connections if they are willing use train 300, leaving St. Louis at 4:30 am.)

Also from August 30, the *Eagle* skips Dwight and Carlville, IL (as it did in 1995); the *State House* and *Ann Rutledge* will continue to make those stops.

Canadian National—An August agreement with the Canadian Auto Workers means a possible strike in October is prevented. It could have affected Amtrak services in Ontario and Michigan.

Safety Statistics and “Factoid” News

The NBC Nightly News on August 10, in one of its regular, pre-commercial-break statistics analyses, said 1997 “Travel Deaths” were 42,000 for highways, 976 for aviation, and 746 for rail (no source given). But the problem with such “sound-bite” analyses is that the misleading notation “Travel Deaths” must have led many viewers to the false conclusion that 746 rail “travelers” (i.e., passengers) died in 1997.

Where did NBC get its information? Probably from a National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) release—also from August 10—with 1997 fatality figures broken down into sub-categories. Journalists diligent enough to read the whole thing learned that of the 746 rail deaths, 584 were “trespassers and nontrespassers,” 49 were “employees and contractors,” 6 were “passengers on trains,” and 107 were “light and commuter rail.” Clearly, there were not 746 rail “travel deaths” in 1997, as NBC reported.

But there is still a problem with the NTSB release. It labeled all 746 rail deaths as “Intercity”—very odd, considering the subcategory “light and commuter rail.” From checking with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), NARP learned that the 6 “Intercity” “passengers on trains” deaths included 4 on Amtrak, 1 on the Alaska Railroad, and 1 on SEPTA (a Philadelphia-based *commuter* railroad!—FRA reports on all operations whose safety it regulates, including commuter and tourist railroads). None of the deaths reported to the FRA by Amtrak was the result of an Amtrak accident.

As for the 107 “light and commuter rail” deaths the NTSB counted as “Intercity,” NARP learned that the Federal Transit Administration does provide figures broken down into “patron,” “employees,” and “other” categories. The NTSB did not mention that in its release.

If the public is to derive any benefit from the NTSB’s fatality information, the NTSB needs to do a better job reporting it. NARP has urged the NTSB to reexamine its practices and report figures that are reasonably comparable across modes, informative, and free of misleading double-counts. That would increase the chances that large media entities (like NBC) will report the information more accurately. ■



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