

I attended the 2024 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission in St. Paul, Minnesota on November 18-20 as an ally representing the Rail Passengers Association, of which I am the Nebraska Council Representative, and ProRail Nebraska, a Nebraska passenger rail advocacy organization.

Attendees had the opportunity to travel to the meeting on November 18 from Chicago or Milwaukee via the new Amtrak Borealis service, but I declined due to the additional driving time required. Instead, I drove to St. Paul directly, arriving that afternoon. The conference hotel was just across the street from St. Paul Union Station, the stately building that served the city since 1926, and was the site of the MIPRC meetings. When Amtrak took over passenger service in 1971 a small “Amshack” became the boarding location. However, in 2001 plans began to remake the historic building into a multimodal transportation hub, and in 2012 these plans came to fruition, with Amtrak returning as one of the services offered. I walked to the depot that evening, to meet the Borealis at its approximately 7:00 p.m. arrival and to greet the attendees who had chosen to travel on it. The train arrived on time, and I was astounded at the number of passengers who had made the journey, not counting the conference passengers. We were told the next day that the Borealis service, which began just last May, had exceeded 100,000 riders on that very trip!

Tuesday, November 19

The meeting convened at 8:30 a.m. in the Red Cap Room of St. Paul Union Depot.

Welcome, Introductions, and a look back in time at “Red Caps”

Beth McCluskey, Chair of MIPRC, Welcomed the attendees and noted the extraordinary success of the Amtrak Borealis service.

Nancy Daubenberer, Minnesota Department of Transportation Commissioner, welcomed the attendees to Minnesota.

Kevin Roggenbuck, Senior Transportation Planner, Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority gave a brief history of the St. Paul Union Depot and its \$242 million restoration and moved the Amtrak Empire Builder back. It now also hosts the Borealis, city busses, regional busses, and light rail.

MIPRC Year in Review, Annual Meeting Preview

Laura Kliewer, Director, MIPRC, spoke at length about accomplishments and challenges over the past year, and reviewed the agenda for this meeting.

Status of Passenger Rail Improvements in the Region and Plans for the Future

Illinois – Elliot Ramos reported that his state is served by 56 Amtrak trains daily, carrying 5 million passengers annually. The Lincoln Service now operates at 110 mph over much of its route. It and other state supported trains carry 2 million of those passengers annually. Illinois plans to add new state

supported routes and increase the number of trips per route on existing routes. A Chicago to the Illinois Quad Cities over the Iowa Interstate Railroad is under study (Note: This route could be extended across Iowa to Omaha and Lincoln, providing daily daytime trains in both directions, which would also serve Des Moines and a number of other population centers.). Another study is looking at increasing the frequency of Lincoln Service trains between Chicago and St. Louis with high speed (110 mph) trains.

Indiana – Marty Ramos reported that they are in negotiations with the CSX Railroad for two daily trains each way between Indianapolis and Chicago, which would overlap with the current Amtrak Cardinal Route to Washington D.C., which currently runs only three days a week. They are also considering a route between Indianapolis and Louisville, KY and are participating in the Midwest Connect Corridor that will be a regional route linking Chicago; Ft. Wayne, IN; Columbus, OH; and Pittsburg, PA. They have learned that regional service proposals demand ongoing stakeholder communication and coordination, and the challenge is to identify win-win strategies.

Kansas - Martin Alvarez noted that his state currently hosts the Amtrak Southwest Chief that runs from Chicago to Los Angeles. They hope to extend the Heartland Flier, which currently runs between Oklahoma City, OK and Ft. Worth, TX, to serve Newton, KS and eventually Kansas City (Note: This route could be extended to Lincoln and/or Omaha if Nebraska would participate.) The expanded route would connect a number of large universities in multiple states.

Michigan – Peter Anistor reported that Michigan currently has three routes with five trips per day, one of which is a 110 mph route between Dearborn and Kalamazoo on state-owned trackage. Michigan has had good success in obtaining federal rail grants. Pedestrian trespassers are a problem, with tragic results. A program to reduce curvature to allow for increased train speed is underway, with 30 of 42 locations completed. A new Detroit station is underway, which will be a multimodal hub for the city. Some wooden bridges on the state-owned route are in need of replacement. All three current routes were selected for the Amtrak Corridor ID program for doubling train frequencies and extension to new locations, including to Canada.

Minnesota – Matt Bailey was pleased with the success of the Amtrak Borealis, its first state-supported train, and more capital improvements are underway to make it even better. The Northern Lights Express is being planned to connect Minneapolis and Duluth. The Northstar commuter service is under study between Minneapolis and St. Cloud/Fargo, ND. Their state rail plan is being updated. Four Minnesota routes are included in the Corridor ID program.

Missouri – Bryan Ross reported that his state is served by the state-funded Missouri River Runner connecting Kansas City and St. Louis, and the Amtrak Texas Eagle and Southwest Chief. An advertiser has been hired to increase ridership on the Missouri River Runner, which is at 182,000 per year. Ollie the Otter will be the new MRR mascot. Bike capacity on the MRR is being increased due to demand, as a bike trail parallels its route. Studies are underway to extend the MRR to St. Joe. The 2026 FIFA (soccer) World Cup tournament will be in Kansas City, which is expected to increase ridership on all routes.

North Dakota – State Senator Mike Wobbema noted that his state is in the planning stage for more passenger rail, as most of the state is served only by freight rail, except for the Amtrak Empire Builder,

which passes through overnight. Rail transportation for college students is a big priority as polling shows that their biggest concern is safety. The proposed North Coast Hiawatha in the Corridor ID program would cross the southern part of the state. He noted that 40% of the state's 800,000 population live within six miles of Minnesota, and many work there, so joint passenger rail planning between the two states is very important.

Wisconsin – Jen Murray said that the Corridor ID program looked at expansion of the Hiawatha (Chicago to Milwaukee) and Borealis (Chicago-Milwaukee-St. Paul) services; Milwaukee to Madison, Eau Clair and Twin Cities; and three other routes. There are seven round trips daily on the Hiawatha and Borealis, plus the daily Empire Builder. Construction projects worth \$56 million are in progress, including a second platform at the Milwaukee airport station, and building a freight train bypass around the Milwaukee intermodal yard. More locomotives and cars are on order, with delivery expected in 2026. Safety issues are also a concern in Wisconsin. A separate commission that was chartered in 2021 is working on a commuter route between Eau Clair and the Twin Cities that would serve two universities and two community colleges over Union Pacific tracks. AIPRO has been contracted to operate the route and HDR will be providing consulting services for the study, which is being led by Scott Rogers (rogers@eauclairechamber.com).

I did not record the name of the person who reported about the Midwest States Equipment Procurement project, a joint order of new rail equipment by MIPRC members to get more favorable pricing for state-supported routes. The order consisted of 33 Siemens Charger locomotives and 88 Siemens Venture cars, which have notably good handicapped accessibility. 80 of those cars have been delivered so far. The locomotives will be needed soon as existing Chargers have been in service long enough that many will require their mid-life major shopping to rebuild the engines and trucks.

Laura Kliewer asked the delegates to consider if more frequent MIPRC meetings will be needed to better coordinate interstate projects and equipment acquisition.

Legislative and Partner Passenger Rail-Related Activity in Our States

The states own the right-of-way for the Chicago-Ft. Wayne-Columbus-Pittsburg Corridor ID Project so there is no good reason not to include passenger service, which would be a vital improvement to overall Midwest passenger rail accessibility. Their motto is "MTFA" (Make Trains Fast Again), considering this route as a good candidate for true high-speed rail (200+ mph). Don't build bottlenecks when you should build for the future.

The Michigan legislature now has a passenger train caucus.

All Aboard Ohio, the passenger rail advocacy group, has restoration of Ohio to MIPRC membership as its priority.

HNTB Corporation, an infrastructure consulting firm based in Kansas City specializing in transportation, is heavily involved in passenger rail projects across the Midwest. They are an MIPRC partner, and had a number of people in attendance.

Siemens is pleased with the progress being made by MIPRC and the Midwest states in enhancing passenger rail service.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation is excited about the success of the Borealis service and how well it has been patronized.

The Kansas legislature is very committed to expand the Heartland Flyer to Newton and eventually to Kansas City, and has a passenger rail caucus. Legislators consider MIPRC to be an exceptional value.

The Minnesota legislature is very aware of the strong public support for passenger rail service expansion, and see the line from Minneapolis to Duluth as a top priority.

The North Dakota legislature is very interested in a Fargo to Twin Cities route, and will be meeting with Minnesota Department of Transportation soon.

Laura Kliewer noted that this was the highest attendance for an MIPRC meeting to date.

AMTRAK Update

Arun Rao, Amtrak Director of Route Development, introduced Ismael Cuevas, Manager of the Chicago Hub Improvement Project, and Martin Sandoval, Manager, Government and Community Affairs, Midwest. Martin is the replacement for Derrick James.

There is a need for Midwest state partners to be looking at future fleet needs, as new equipment has 7 to 10 year lead times from order to delivery, and much legacy equipment is wearing out. Estimates for the 2040 fleet, based on state rail plans are:

- 28 Acella 2 trainsets for the Northeast Corridor
- 83 Airo trainsets for the Northeast Corridor and various states
- ?? Bi-level long-distance cars (under construction)
- 88 State-owned cars

Amtrak needs to know if states want to own and procure their own equipment, or have Amtrak do it?

Amtrak is considering cab control coach cars for some services to allow push-pull operation of trains to eliminate turning trains, which causes delays.

There is an immediate need for six long-distance trainsets to replace 1980s equipment that is in poor condition.

Future needs for long-distance trains for replacement of old equipment and service expansion are estimated at:

Low end	9 trainsets
Midrange	24 trainsets
High end	43 trainsets

The Chicago Hub Improvement Project (CHIP) is being driven by the impact Chicago's rail facilities have on much of the Amtrak system since it is the primary hub. This major investment in infrastructure will:

- Improve connectivity
- Reduce travel times
- Improve safety
- Connect job centers

Chicago Union Station serves 120,000 daily riders. Its infrastructure has not kept pace with demand. CHIP will invest in the following infrastructure projects (note that Amtrak only owns one mile of track in Chicago):

New maintenance facility south of Union Station. New equipment needs more modern shop facilities.

Replace the South Branch Viaduct. This 1914 lift bridge over the Chicago River has too low clearance for river traffic, resulting in many openings daily that cause train delays. Plans are under discussion with the city. The landmark status of the bridge is a complicating factor.

Update Chicago Union Station. Its last upgrade was in 1981, and demand has outgrown expectations. A large part of the project will expand platform capacity by reopening the former mail handling platforms and tracks, renovating them for passenger service, and lengthening three existing platforms.

Possible satellite maintenance shops outside downtown Chicago to reduce traffic near Union Station.

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Update

Amit Bose, FRA Administrator, noted that FRA's responsibilities have grown over time, accounting for its \$66 billion budget for fiscal years 2022 through 2026. He made special mention that the National University Rail Center of Excellence is located within the heart of MIPRC territory at the University of Illinois – Urbana/Champaign, and is the center of a multi-university coalition of rail study. He reiterated the importance of the Chicago Union Station modernization by Amtrak, noting the improvements in Chicago will aid performance nationwide.

The Evolution of FRA's Corridor ID (CID) Program

FRA representatives Barbara Moreno and Megan Neeck explained how the program is changing now that the first round of project awards have been made. Project award winners should use this process for engaging with freight railroads expected to host new routes:

Understand that passenger service impacts the freight railroads. FRA has three people interfacing with the freight railroads about CID:

1 for Burlington Northern Santa Fe, Union Pacific, and Canadian Pacific Kansas City

1 for CSX, Canadian National, and Norfolk Southern

1 for all short lines

When engaging:

Communicate

Engage early

Understand their perspective

Keep communicating

Use the host railroad web sites to ascertain how to involve them in public projects.

FRA CID actions so far:

Sent a request for information about CID to the freight railroads.

Sent a public notice of CID results for applications to implement approved routes.

Released application framework and updated it twice.

Application submission process, step 1:

Submit service development plan.

FRA will evaluate for a funding management plan.

Do gap analysis.

Submit statement of work.

Submit schedule.

Submit budget.

Identify specific projects with FRA and stakeholders.

The FRA reports to Congress annually as required by law.

Spotlight on MIPRC Partners

MIPRC's newest partner organization is HNTB Corporation of Kansas City, a transportation consulting and design firm. Aaron Bowe and Peter Schwartz review their firm's work on the Colorado Front Range Passenger Rail Project, which will eventually link cities all along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains from Santa Fe, NM to Cheyenne, WY, roughly following I-25 on existing rail lines. This is the first project to achieve step 2 of the Corridor ID (CID) plan. The initial phase will connect Pueblo to Ft. Collins through Denver. The State of Colorado created the Front Range Passenger Rail Commission to implement the plan. They are drafting the Service Development Plan. Five service alternatives are being evaluated with 9 station stops. Analysis so far indicates it is a good market for rail, competitive in speed and cost with highway travel, and eventually superior as highway congestion increases over time.

Lessons learned so far:

Railroad negotiations depend on understanding their operating analyses.

Managing stakeholder expectations is critical and difficult.

Station area outreach and analysis is very important.

Governance and funding must be firmly established.

MIPRC's CRISI and Interstate Rail Compacts Grants

MIPRC has applied for a federal grant available only to Interstate Rail Compacts (IRCs) like MIPRC. They requested \$300,000 over two years as a 50% match against the current MIPRC budget. This will enable MIPRC to expand:

- Administration staff and services.
- Passenger rail promotion activities.
- Applications for federal grants.

MIPRC has successfully qualified for a federal Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant in the amount of \$2.3 million. It will support MIPRC undertaking a five year study on behalf of its members to:

- Identify and quantify ridership and revenues on existing routes and new CID routes.
- Estimate their economic impact.
- Develop a corridor phasing strategy.

Work has not yet started. The objective is to help MIPRC states to develop a cohesive passenger rail strategy for the Midwest. (NOTE!: NEBRASKA NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED IN THIS PROCESS!!!!!!) A steering committee will be formed to develop a detailed plan for the study.

Federal Update

House and Senate budget bills for fiscal year 2025 are slightly different at this time, but neither house has approved a budget. MIPRC expects to need to change its messaging due to changes in congressional membership.

Wednesday, November 20

Focus Groups: MIPRC's New E-Newsletter

Cherlyn Gnadl of MIPRC's office staff presented three proposed layout samples for a new email newsletter for use in both outreach and education. There will be multiple versions customized for different audiences. The first edition should be out by the end of 2024. Attendees were given an opportunity to comment. The website will also be revised and hosted on a faster platform.

MIPRC 2025 Priorities

- E-Newsletters for commissioners, Partners, and Allies.
- New website and platform.
- CRISI grant obligated.

Restore former members.

25th Anniversary of MIPRC celebration.

Equipment working group for Midwest.

Priorities for Surface Transportation Bill.

Talking Points reauthorization.

Amtrak workshop.

Hold a Midwest Rail Summit for Governors and State Secretaries of Transportation.

Commission Business

Dues have increased to enable application for the full CRISI grant. The grant will be a separate budget item.

An election of officers was held.

The next meeting of the commission and the 25th anniversary celebration will be held concurrently at Chicago Union Station for three days. Dates have not yet been finalized. A committee will be formed to plan the celebration.

As many of the commissioners are elected official from their states, or appointees by elected officials, some will be leaving MIPRC after this meeting, and those persons were recognized.

The meeting was adjourned.