



ProRail Nebraska News

Dedicated to supporting and advocating for railroad service in the State of Nebraska

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2013 President's Report

By Dave Purdy

ProRail Nebraska had a busy year acting as Nebraska's advocate for passenger rail service. We tried to motivate the Legislature, trying to get the State to resume dues payments to the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC). Simultaneously, we tried to protect Nebraska's interests in the development of plans to provide passenger rail service across Iowa; ultimately from Omaha to Chicago.

Nebraska was a charter member of the MIPRC. This is a body composed of eight states, centered on Chicago. The intent is that Chicago should become a hub for passenger rail, with lines radiating in all four directions. In some directions the system is mature. To the north, for example, there is good rail service to Milwaukee. To the south, there is service to Saint Louis with high speed upgrades progressing. Our primary concern is with service to the west, which is in an early stage of development. The role of MIPRC is to coordinate the various services, and keep the members informed on progress. Nebraska chose to quit paying its dues to MIPRC three years ago, and therefore lost access to its information. We tried to get Nebraska to resume paying dues. In a measure, we were successful. The Legislature voted to resume dues, but Governor Heineman vetoed the measure. Senator Dubas, Chair of the Transportation & Telecommunications Committee, was considerable help to us.

The other major issue we are working on is Omaha-Chicago passenger service. This service is being developed in stages, starting at the Chicago end. Illinois has developed funding for service from Chicago to Moline Ill. Construction will begin next spring, and service might start in late 2015. Iowa has developed construction funding to extend the

service to Iowa City, but the Iowa legislature has not yet agreed to the operating subsidy required. Now the Iowa Department of Transportation is designing the service between Iowa City and Omaha. This portion has been divided into two phases, Iowa City to Council Bluffs and Council Bluffs to Omaha.

ProRail has participated in public meetings used to provide citizen input into the design, and has also presented written comments.

The State of Nebraska has not participated in the study, either by way of providing money or encouragement. Unless the State changes its attitude, the service is likely to terminate in Council Bluffs. ProRail has therefore been working to get the State interested. One suggestion we have made is to extend the service to Lincoln.

This extension would extend the direct benefits to half the population of Nebraska.

Next year ProRail will renew the fight to rejoin MIPRC. Senator Dubas seems to think the matter can again be passed by the legislature and made proof against a veto. We will also continue to monitor the Omaha-Chicago study. Finally, we will try to extend the study to Lincoln by working principally with the Cities of Lincoln and Omaha.

Also next year, ProRail plans to present a series of meetings which will better inform the membership. Topics will include successful passenger rail projects and related projects such as the Kansas City streetcar .

All these efforts will be enhanced by ProRail's membership. Sheer numbers count to the politicians in Lincoln. Active participation by members will also do a lot to make our influence felt.

Notice

For existing members, it's time to renew. See the enclosed dues payment form. Non-members can use the form to join ProRail Nebraska.

Urban Affairs Committee Hearing Testimony

November 15, 2013

By Matthew Roque, ProRail Lobbyist

First of all I would like to thank Senator Mello, Chairwoman McGill, and the Urban Affairs Committee for the work they are doing on behalf of the citizens of Nebraska. As a city planner, I know that transit issues are not the sexiest of topics, though require a great amount of planning.

LR 318 lists four issues to study, and though they are all appropriate, I would like to focus my testimony specifically on the fourth issue stated; the long-term future of transportation options and cooperative models in the Omaha and Lincoln areas.

Long-term transportation planning really is long-term. I applaud Senator Mello and this committee for recognizing that looking 10-20 years out is absolutely necessary when it comes to transportation issues. The Interstate Highway System was authorized by the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. But it wasn't until 18 years later that Nebraska became the first state to complete all of its mainline interstate portions. Interstate 80 through Nebraska took 18 years to plan, fund, contract and build.

It is with this in mind that I urge this committee and the Nebraska Legislature to continue its membership in the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact (MIPRC). The MIPRC is dedicated to advocating for improvements to passenger rail in the Midwest. Through the foresight and guidance of political leaders at the time, Nebraska was a founding member of the MIPRC in 2000. Since 2010 though, the State of Nebraska has refused to fulfill its responsibilities by failing to pay dues to this organization.

The MIPRC though has soldiered on. Since its founding the MIPRC has continued to meet with

and educate Members of Congress on the true benefits of passenger rail. It has advocated for support of Amtrak, while accepting that some reform of the organization is necessary. It has also advocated for greater federal funding for overhauling passenger rail cars and purchasing new equipment.

Though not affiliated with MIPRC, another passenger rail project is at Nebraska's door and knocking. The Chicago to Council Bluffs passenger rail project has been a collaborative effort between the Illinois and Iowa

Departments of Transportation. This project will provide an alternative to Amtrak, running trains from Chicago to Iowa City to Des Moines to Council Bluffs. Initially, the goal of this projects proponent would be to have the train terminate in Omaha. Up to this point, only the Cities of Omaha and Lincoln have shown any interest in this project as they recognize the benefits that accompany it. The failure of the State of Nebraska to

display any interest whatsoever may prove costly in the future. Our neighbors to the east may not take kindly to our late arrival after all of the planning and legwork is complete.

Overall, passenger rail is a viable and environmentally friendly method of transportation that will continue to serve riders well into the future. But the time for idly sitting by and watching others plan our future is over. By renewing our interest in and paying dues for the MIPRC, Nebraska can show our neighbors that we want a seat at the table. As a famous president once said, "Decisions are made by those who show up." All I ask is that we show up.

Save the Date!

The next ProRail Nebraska Members Meeting will be on Saturday, March 29, 9 am to Noon at Omaha's UNO Campus. Program highlights: Presentation on the Seward/Lincoln Rail Campus, update on the Chicago-Omaha Rail Passenger Study, and plans for the 2014 Legislative Session.

The Chicago-Omaha Project – A Status Report

By Dave Purdy, ProRail Nebraska President

This project will be built in stages, starting in Chicago and eventually ending in Omaha.

The first stage is Chicago to Moline, Illinois. It is entirely inside Illinois. Funding is in place, and design is complete. Construction will commence in spring of 2014. Service will start in 2015. The major construction activities are upgrading the Iowa Interstate (ex-RI) track, providing a signal system on the stretch from Wyanet, Illinois to Moline, and constructing the connection to the BNSF at Wyanet.

The second stage is from Moline to Iowa City. This stage is in Iowa. The design is complete. Federal money has been allotted. Iowa has not appropriated money for its 20% share of the project. Iowa DOT is preparing fresh cost estimates for the project, to be presented to the Governor. If the cost estimate is feasible, the Governor will present it to the Legislature for approval. If the Legislature approves, all is well and good. If it does not approve, the project may be dead. A decision is expected in the next few months. A negative decision could occur much more quickly.

The stage from Iowa City to Omaha is the subject of an ongoing study. The Tier 1 environmental study has been successfully completed. A service development plan is under way, scheduled for completion by December 12. The next step will be to perform tier 2 environmental study. After that. Federal funds will be sought for 30% engineering and final design. Then construction could begin. Construction is at least two years off.

Excerpts from Testimony Before Urban Affairs Legislative Resolution 318 Hearing

By Milo Mumgaard, Senior Policy Aide for Sustainability, City of Lincoln – November 15, 2013

(Editor's note: The following excerpts were taken from Mr. Mumgaard's 8-page testimony with a focus on what he had to say about Nebraska's need for better public transportation services. [Click here](#) to view the complete document.)

The City of Lincoln believes that, while the completed expansion of I-80 is highly significant and we should pause to congratulate everyone on this accomplishment, it is also time to begin critically important regional transportation planning out over the next 30 to 40 years, especially with respect to mass transit needs in the region.

The City of Lincoln is just one of many important potential regional partners in collaborating on a long-term transportation vision more fully including cost-effective, complementary, and environmentally friendly public mass transit. Through such regional collaborations, we should be able to plan for and build a more robust regional mass transit system, one that includes both rail and bus transit options. If we can more fully collaborate across city, county, and transportation authority lines, we will all be able to share in the benefits of a regional mass transit system. These benefits will include saving taxpayer and consumer dollars, relieving congestion into the future, and offering new jobs and economic development. Most importantly, it will help insure Nebraskans can get where they want to go- whether to work, school, or play- safely and efficiently.

Today's hearing provides an excellent starting point to begin such a renewed regional mass transit planning effort.

Transportation economists and planners see a variety of population, workplace, and lifestyle changes that are already altering our transportation landscape. The more obvious ones are increasing urbanization and denser, more compact housing choices. Less obvious is the slow decline in the per capita driving rates- the driving "boom" of the period 1946 to 2004 appears to have crested. People still need to get where they want to go, though, and there is a significant growth in shared auto transportation- such as ZipCars and Cars2Go- and bike sharing programs.

Further, the younger members of the "Millennial Generation"- the largest generation in U.S. history- are showing in recent studies a consistent desire to be multi-modal in their transportation choices. This generation is choosing

(continued from page 3) the best transportation mode (driving, transit, bike, or walk) based on the trip they are planning to take. Communities that are attracting these “Millennials” have a multitude of these transportation choices. This generation also wishes to conduct digital socializing and be able to work while traveling, and is choosing public transportation as the best option for allowing this to occur. “Millennials” are also seeking the most energy efficient mode of travel, and again they view public transportation as the best option.

To date the planning for regional mass transit in eastern Nebraska has largely been a function of the Nebraska Department of Roads (NDOR) long-range transportation planning process..... MAP-21 (the “Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act”) is the current long-range federal surface transportation program, authorized by Congress in 2012 for 2013-2014. Nevertheless, even with MAP-21, long-range federal transportation policy continues to be uncertain.

The NDOR, in complying with this federal funding requirement, in 2012 completed “Vision 2032: Nebraska Long-Range Transportation Plan.” This “overarching policy guide” extensively describes the transportation challenges facing the State of Nebraska, focuses on the themes of safety, mobility, environmental stewardship, and coordination and cooperation, and included a detailed public stakeholder engagement process.

Vision 2032, however, while a valuable resource, is not a planning document for regional mass transit. Other than the above, there is no specific goal, objective, performance measure, strategy, or action step specifically to encourage and develop mass transit in Nebraska, much less on a regional basis in eastern Nebraska. In July, 2013, the NDOR released its Surface Transportation Program for 2014-2019, and there are no mass transit capital improvements planned in this program.

The Nebraska Legislature most recently provided for regional mass transit planning through the creation, in 1999, of the Nebraska Transit and Rail Advisory Council (NTRAC). The NTRAC was created “to assess the transportation demand and needs of current and future commuters.”..... The highly detailed NTRAC “Nebraska Transit Corridors Study” (conducted prior to the launch of the widening of Interstate 80 to six lanes) concluded that it was, at that time, not financially feasible to move towards a dedicated commuter rail system, and that express bus-only service would be the most practical step forward to ease congestion and provide additional public mass transit. The study went on, though, to review a wide range of the issues and challenges each approach included, and agreed commuter rail service, while at that time a very high per-rider cost, could become a more viable alternative in the future.

The NTRAC went out of business in 2004, and this study has gone largely unaddressed since that time. Nevertheless, it is a strong template for future regional mass transit planning options, identifies the parties that have an interest in the future of mass transit, and points the way to the type of feasibility and planning studies necessary for significant future investment in larger scale, regional mass transit.

Lastly, while both the Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA) in Omaha, and the City of Lincoln’s Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) both include mass transit planning within their own service areas as part of their federally required responsibilities, there has been no collaboration between these groups as to regional mass transit needs and plans.

At the same time, there is a considerable level of activity in the Midwest region to identify, plan for, and invest in expanded passenger rail. This expanded level of “rapid rail” intercity service is already in place in Illinois and Michigan, now featuring express lines going between 79 and 110 MPH between Chicago and St. Louis, and Chicago and Detroit. This expansion is intended to include the cities of Omaha and Lincoln, all the way to Denver.

This “Midwest Regional Rail System” is being developed and promoted by the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC), of which the State of Nebraska is a statutory member. The State of Nebraska, however, has not been regularly involved in the MIPRC, has not provided commissioners for the compact, and has failed to pay its annual dues over at least the last four years. Meanwhile, the MIPRC has surged ahead with federal, state, and local funding to support a new and expanding web of passenger rail options in the region, including up to Nebraska’s doorstep.

(continued from page 4) The State of Iowa's Department of Transportation (IowaDOT) has aggressively participated in the MIPRC's expanded rapid rail system, and has directed the completion of preliminary plans and environmental reviews for the creation of a new line from Chicago to Council Bluffs, through Des Moines (which presently has no passenger rail connection to Chicago). This new line will allow for two to three hour trips from Des Moines to Chicago, and is heavily supported by the Iowa business and economic development community.

The present planning for this new line, however, terminates in Council Bluffs despite the express intent of the expanded system to cross into Omaha and continue through Lincoln and the rest of Nebraska. Mayor Beutler of Lincoln has expressed his desire to see this federally-funded planning continue into Nebraska, including feasibility studies, so Nebraska is not permanently left out of this mass transit option. For example, this line could provide passenger commuter rail between Omaha and Lincoln. Such a situation exists, for example, in Normal, Illinois, the home of Illinois State University, where the "rapid rail" line now between Chicago and St. Louis, along with a new train modern train station, has caused ridership to explode to now over 250,000 a year.

From the City of Lincoln's perspective, it has also made a concrete commitment to the future of passenger rail as a commuter and intercity transportation option future through the construction of the new \$1.2 million "Haymarket Station." This new modern station is one block from the new Pinnacle Bank Arena and only a few blocks from Memorial Stadium, and is poised to act as a center of multi-modal transportation for Lincoln and the region. The continuation of planning for the Chicago to Omaha to Lincoln rapid rail line now being developed through Iowa is therefore of significant interest to the City of Lincoln.

The State of Nebraska's lack of participation in planning for this line thus far does jeopardize any future modern passenger rail opportunities, including access to federal funding. The State of Nebraska could partially ameliorate this by simply reengaging with the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission.

Nevertheless, local officials are determined to act on their own, and moving forward on planning for commuter rail was a key part of an October 4, 2013 "roundtable" event held at the Haymarket Station, sponsored by the City of Lincoln and State Senator Annette Dubas. This event included representatives of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the League of Municipalities, the railroads, the MAPA and MPO, the City of Omaha, and many others.

The participants were largely supportive of seeking additional planning for a commuter rail between Omaha and Lincoln, in addition to a future linking up with the new Iowa rapid rail line. This event showed a strong desire for regional mass transit planning in general, and the potential updating of the NTRAC study to reflect new demographics, costs, and transportation realities. For example, with respect to passenger commuter rail (with multiple daily scheduled runs between Omaha and Lincoln), the line could be developed using the existing BNSF/Amtrak rail lines. Using costs identified in the Iowa DOT study of the Chicago to Council Bluffs rapid rail line, this would likely be an upgrading cost of approximately \$2 million per mile of rail infrastructure, in contrast to the cost of one mile of the recent Interstate 80 expansion at \$9.6 million per mile.

A commuter-based passenger rail line between Omaha and Lincoln, and possibly other Nebraska destinations, is not a far-fetched concept. Indeed, many other states and metropolitan regions have extensive commuter and intercity rail systems moving millions of people a day. Even relatively low-population areas feature heavily used commuter passenger rail. For example, in the State of New Mexico, the "New Mexico Rail Runner" is a commuter rail line running many daily trains between Albuquerque and Santa Fe (and stops between). This approximately 90 minute train ride features, for about \$9, free internet, modern cars and seats, bike space, and AC/DC- perfect for the business commuter, student, or families visiting relatives. The train uses BNSF right of way and runs 7 days a week, operated by a private company for the Rio Metro Regional Transit District (RMRTD), central New Mexico's regional public transit authority.

A transportation system worthy of the 21st century in eastern Nebraska will include more mass transit options for commuters, businesses, families, and travelers of all kinds. The City of Lincoln is willing to be an active partner in developing these options, including through its StarTran transit agency. This long-term vision should focus on being cost-effective, complementary, and environmentally friendly. In that light, we believe it is time for the Nebraska Legislature to begin the level of regional planning and foresight required to take full advantage of the benefits a more robust regional mass transit system will offer for Nebraska's future.

Missouri DOT 2 – Nebraska DOR 0!

By Clyde Anderson, ProRail Director District #2

For about 5 years the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) has had a public-private partnership with Union Pacific to help fund capacity improvements on Amtrak's St. Louis – Kansas City route used by two daily pairs of Missouri River Runner trains. In addition to station improvements at St. Louis, Jefferson City, and Sedalia, MoDOT invested \$5 million state and \$3.1 Million federal funds for a new passing siding near California, MO. Union Pacific invested \$34.1 million for a new bridge across the Gasconade River eliminating a single-track bottleneck.

On November 25, 2013, state, federal, and UP officials dedicated a new rail bridge across the Osage River. The new bridge, located just east of Jefferson City in Osage City, Mo., will unclog the last single-track bottleneck on UP's rail corridor between St. Louis and Jefferson City, a distance of about 130 miles. The new bridge is downstream and immediately adjacent to the existing bridge at milepost 116.9 on UP's Sedalia Subdivision. The total cost for all the work originally was estimated at \$28.4 million, but MoDOT officials now think the work could come in \$3 million to \$4 million under budget. The project is Missouri's first rail infrastructure project to be awarded and begin construction under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

This Fall MoDOT and the UP started planning and design for two new two-mile long sidings along the Sedalia Sub. Plans call for the installation of sidings in Kingsville and near Knob Noster. In October MoDOT held a public open house to detail a possible project that would add a second main track between Lee's Summit and Strasburg. In addition to the four daily Amtrak trains, this single track line handles nearly 30 freight trains a day. MoDOT and UP are also studying several rural grade crossings for possible closure or upgraded warning devices.

Although the Nebraska Department of Roads (DOR) is responsible for multi-modal transportation planning in our state, its efforts are totally inadequate as pointed out in Milo Mumgaard's article on the previous pages. Nebraska is the only state in the union without a Department of Transportation. ProRail advocates for the creation of a Nebraska Department of Surface Transportation with a clear function to plan, develop, and implement passenger rail service. That's what's needed to start catching up with Missouri!

Seward on track with rail campus proposal

Jonathan Jank, Executive Director for the Seward County Economic Development Corporation, met with the ProRail Nebraska Board November 23. The Seward/Lincoln Regional Rail Campus is an ambitious project to attract industrial development to the area. The 300-acre site, which can be expanded to over 600 acres, is located adjacent to BNSF's Ravenna Subdivision mainline and less than 5 miles from I-80. The site currently is a cornfield.

The centerpiece for the Rail Campus is a double-track rail loop large enough to accommodate 130-car unit trains. Additional yard tracks and industry spurs would be built to meet the specific needs of the industries that locate on the site. Mr. Jank has been invited to make a presentation at ProRail's Members Meeting in Omaha next March.

A similar Rail Campus project is being proposed for Columbus, Nebraska.

ProRail Nebraska is a not-for-profit organization founded to inform the citizens of Nebraska about the benefits of railroads and to promote balanced, efficient transportation - both freight and passenger - in Nebraska and the Nation.

ProRail Nebraska welcomes new members. Dues are only \$20/year which helps pay for our advocacy and educational programs.

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