

# Badger Rails

Wisconsin Association of  
Railroad Passengers (WisARP)

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## Broad Coalition of Supporters Continues Work on Rail

By Michael McCoy

An informal coalition of non-profit organizations born during the fight last year to save high-speed rail in Wisconsin is continuing its advocacy mission despite the rejection by then Governor-Elect and now Governor Scott Walker of \$800-million plus in federal funding to start a new era in mass transportation here.

Known to its participants as the Wisconsin Rail Coalition, the group remains largely conference call-based for now. During the high-speed rail campaign last year, calls were scheduled at least weekly, usually on Fridays, to share information and identify ways to reinforce the advocacy efforts of the others.

Now calls are usually bi-weekly, also on Fridays, with much the same purpose but broadened to include advocacy for both conventional and high-speed intercity passenger rail. They generally last

no more than an hour.

Reminders of the call times go to 43 individuals representing about two dozen organizations, with some organizations having more than one representative participating. Groups include WisARP; ProRail, WisARP's Madison Chapter; NEWRail; Empire Builder High Speed Rail Coalition; Wisconsin Public Interest Group; Sierra Club; Wisconsin Rural and Urban Transit Association; Transit Now; Midwest High Speed Rail Association; and the Environmental Law & Policy Center (ELPC). ProRail recently assumed responsibility for hosting the conference calls, including developing agendas.

The group also has added in recent weeks an online archive where participants can upload relevant information and other materials for permanent access by participants.

The coalition participants on a recent call affirmed the coalition's overall purposes for now as being to:

-- Use the conference calls and associated email list to share information about current organizational concerns and activities. This sharing also should help those on the calls identify ways they might be helpful to each other.

-- Help those organizations with a continuing major focus on passenger rail to use this "recovery" period from the loss of federal funding to jointly discuss

### Proposed Budget Includes Rail Money

The *Hiawatha Corridor* and rail freight capital needs are identified for funding in the proposed 2012-2013 Wisconsin State Budget. The budget includes:

*Hiawatha*: \$7,701,900 in state and federal funding are programmed for Wisconsin's share of the corridor for the biennium. This is an increase in funding to cover estimated costs of service under new contracts with Amtrak. Wisconsin currently pays 75% of the cost not covered by route revenues

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## **Budget from Page 1**

for *Hiawatha* service and the State of Illinois pays 25%. The increase will also pay the costs of maintaining longer trains sets. The new Talgo train sets are scheduled to begin running this year, and Talgo will provide all maintenance for the equipment under contract with the State. There is no additional money in the budget for additional Talgo train sets.

Maintenance will be provided at Talgo's Milwaukee plant. Talgo is reportedly considering moving its railcar manufacturing operations out of that facility, possibly to a site in Illinois.

Another plus for the *Hiawatha Corridor* is that previously-announced federal funding for installation of crossovers on the Canadian Pacific at Truesdell and for extension of platforms at the Mitchell Airport Rail Station was not killed, and that work will be completed.

*Rail Freight:* \$60 million in bonding would be authorized by the Budget, with \$2.3 million in State funds for debt service in the bonds. Bonds authorized for this program may be used to acquire abandoned railroad lines or make improvements on lines already owned by the state.

*Intercity Bus:* Funding for contracts and grants designed to increase the availability of intercity bus service would be cut, from the current \$1,228,600, to \$1,151,100 in 2012-13 (a 6.3% reduction).

*Bicycle/Pedestrian:* State and federal funding for bicycle and pedestrian facilities programs would decrease from a base of \$5,220,000, to \$4,649,600 in 2011-12 and \$4,949,600 in 2012-13.

*Fund Transfers:* There will be no transfers from the transportation fund to the general fund. Under the Doyle Administration, money had been transferred out of transportation to fund education programs, replaced with transportation bonding for a net loss of money. An additional \$95.1 million will be added to transportation fund revenue by depositing the proceeds from existing automobile-related taxes and fees into the fund, including a portion of sales

taxes collected on automobile-related purchases, vehicle title fees and a portion of revenues from the petroleum inspection fund.

*Transit:* Local transit operating assistance would be decreased and moved from the transportation fund to the general fund beginning in FY 2012 - 2013. This move is expected to pit transit funding for Wisconsin's 73 transit systems against all other programs that rely on the general fund. Transit is clearly a transportation program, and this amounts to a virtual fund transfer from the general fund while placing transit in a most precarious position for future funding.

*Transit Authorities:* Republican-sponsored Senate Bill 25 currently under consideration would eliminate the regional transit authorities allowed under the current biennial budget. This includes not only the RTA for Racine, Kenosha and Milwaukee counties but also the Dane County, Chippewa Valley and Chequamegon Bay authorities. The Southeastern Wisconsin authority, SERTA, has been looking at ways to fund the proposed KRM commuter rail line between Milwaukee, Racine and Kenosha. Passage of this bill would effectively kill the KRM, as it deletes the rental car tax funding as well as the DOT's Southeast Wisconsin transit capital assistance program.

These are some of the highlights of a mostly Draconian budget and recent legislative actions. Budget requests are available to review online from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau:

<http://legis.wisconsin.gov/lfb/>

## **2011 Rail Loans and Grants Announced**

The Wisconsin DOT announced March 11 eleven state grant and loan awards totaling \$25 million for rail freight line acquisition and rehabilitation.

More than \$16 million of the funding will flow to the Wisconsin & Southern Railroad, operator of most of the State-owned corridors. Work will include bridge and track rehabilitation benefitting state freight shippers.

## Minnesota Continues Planning for Rail Projects

Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton met with U.S. DOT Secretary Ray LaHood Feb. 24 to lobby for a portion of federal stimulus money rejected by Florida's Governor Rick Scott.

Minnesota Public Radio reported that Dayton said LaHood talked specifically about a link from the Twin Cities to the home of the Mayo Clinic. The governor spoke on a conference call with reporters after the meeting.

"He's very encouraged to hear that we want to make that a priority and that we talked specifically about Rochester to the Twin Cities, as either a project in its own right, or as part of still a possible route from Chicago to the Twin Cities," Dayton said.

A link to Chicago was scratched after Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker said he wasn't interested in running the line through that state. However, LaHood said Feb. 9 that Minnesota was "absolutely not" out of the running for high speed rail service despite opposition from the Wisconsin governor. He added that high speed lines could be pieced together in the way interstate highway segments were, over decades of development.

Dayton said federal officials are still willing to consider a link from Rochester to the Twin Cities, one potential leg of the original plan.

"They were very impressed with the plan that the commissioner and MnDOT had prepared on high speed rail, and to which the Twin Cities to Rochester route is actually the most prominent one," he said. "The first one that is mentioned in the information we provided to the secretary today and so it's very much now on their radar screen."

Dayton also mentioned a potential route through Iowa as an alternative.

Meanwhile, Dan Krom, Minnesota DOT co-project manager for passenger rail, said March 10 that federal funding remains the key to moving forward with any alternatives.

"We have six or seven lines prepared for the state, but we don't have a funding source," said Krom in the St. Paul Pioneer Press. He said the State has 14 plans in its route evaluation, funded by federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act money, in total. By the summer, MnDOT will likely have those 14 potential corridors narrowed down to one preferred strategy. Amtrak — or another provider, if one were to materialize — could still proceed through Wisconsin. Planning on a Twin Cities-to-Milwaukee route is far enough along to move forward, he said.

"The original plan was to go down to Madison on its way to Milwaukee, but the corridor isn't dependent on that," he said. "It's not a project death knell by any means."

A train could also head south from the Twin Cities to Des Moines and Iowa City in Iowa before veering off toward Chicago. Plans for a southbound route from the Twin Cities were always on the table, Krom said, but for perhaps as far as 30 years into the future. That timetable could be moved up overnight.

Chicago by way of high-speed rail is a key destination for planners hoping to link the Twin Cities to other commercial hubs and, ultimately, a national rail network. But it's not the only strategy in mind. Ramsey County is working with Amtrak on possibly adding a second train to its existing Empire Builder route, which makes daily trips between the Twin Cities and Chicago at traditional speeds. And meanwhile, a study continues on a rail link between St. Paul and Duluth.

Krom said that despite enthusiasm in Rochester for a rail line linking the Mayo Clinic to the Twin Cities through Dakota County, that project is farther out. No existing track offers an active, direct link between the two destinations, and environmental assessments will be lengthy and costly.

"It's a long-term project," Krom said. "Acquisition of right-of-way will take years, if not a decade."

# IMPROVING RAIL PASSENGER SERVICE IN WISCONSIN

## The WisARP Program February, 2011

At the present time, intercity and commuter rail passenger service in Wisconsin consists of seven daily Amtrak trains in each direction between Milwaukee, Sturtevant and Chicago (*Hiawatha Service*); one daily Amtrak train (the *Empire Builder*), which travels Chicago-Milwaukee-Twin Cities-Seattle /Portland; and Metra commuter rail service between Kenosha and Chicago. Wisconsin cities served by the *Empire Builder* include Milwaukee, Columbus, Portage, Wisconsin Dells, Tomah and LaCrosse.

The Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers (WisARP) strives to improve the quantity and quality of rail passenger service in Wisconsin and the nation. To achieve these ends, WisARP is promoting (1) the establishment of a stable funding source for rail passenger service, and (2) the following program.

### Part 1: Service Expansion

1. The Midwest Regional Rail System (MWRRS), a plan proposed by nine Midwestern states for more frequent and higher speed (110 mph max) passenger train service in the Midwest, should be implemented. This plan proposes higher speed rail passenger service in the Chicago - Milwaukee - Twin Cities corridor. A subsequent phase of the plan would add rail passenger service between Chicago and Green Bay. This system would allow fast and convenient rail passenger service between major Wisconsin cities and other major Midwestern cities.
2. The \$50 million bonding authority that was enacted by the state legislature to restore rail passenger to Green Bay and Madison should be used to implement the Midwest Regional Rail System.
3. As an interim step to full implementation of the Midwest Regional Rail System, Amtrak is urged to immediately add an additional round-trip frequency on the existing Chicago - Milwaukee - Twin Cities route.
4. The addition of services under the MWRRS or other proposals must have adequate underlying support from a mix of federal, state, local and passenger sources. New conventional speed services added to existing freight rights-of-way should be given preference over those requiring the addition of a significant number of dedicated passenger-only segments.
5. Commuter train service options need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and implemented where feasible, provided that public investments for commuter rail do not come at the expense of funding for intercity passenger rail. An extension of the current Chicago - Kenosha service to Milwaukee would open up many local trips between Milwaukee and Chicago that are not available with limited-stop *Hiawatha Service*, in addition to allowing local Wisconsin commuting.

## Part 2: Stations

1. WisDOT should develop a railroad station improvement program and assist local communities in acquiring control of railroad stations. The renovation of the downtown Milwaukee station, the new stations in Sturtevant and Milwaukee General Mitchell International Airport, are all positive collaborations of federal, state and local investments as well as public and private-sector involvement. However, WisDOT must take a more systematic approach to rail passenger station facilities by developing a station improvement plan, including determining the proper level of services needed, and the ability of local communities to participate in maintaining and promoting services at those stations. WisARP believes that at larger stations, personnel should be available to assist passengers and handle baggage; and local and intercity transportation connections should be available. All intercity rail stations should be substantial buildings and have adequate and safe parking.

## Part 3: Public Policy

WisARP recognizes the role rail passenger service can play in providing quality, economical transportation statewide, in combating the urban problems of congestion and air pollution, and in helping Wisconsin retain its superior quality of life with continued economic development. As a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization, WisARP educates the citizens and public officials of Wisconsin about these and other benefits of rail passenger service, and sees value in the following efforts.

1. WisARP supports a broadened funding base for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. WisARP opposes transfers at the state level of segregated transportation funds to general fund (non-transportation) programs.
2. WisARP supports the development of commuter rail service and light rail transportation where they are economically justified, provided that public investments for commuter and light rail do not come at the expense of funding for intercity passenger rail.
3. WisARP supports the preservation of selected current and abandoned railroad rights of way for future passenger train or light rail use.
4. WisARP supports the passage of legislation at the federal or state level that would give all rail carriers the same insurance liability limits that Amtrak enjoys.
5. WisARP supports the addition of new long-distance passenger train routes and improvements to existing routes throughout the U.S.A., where they are economically justified.
6. WisARP supports grade crossing separation and elimination projects which aim to make both road and rail travel safer. WisARP believes that all road projects that involve a rail crossing, with either current or projected passenger train use, should be required to address the issue of grade crossing elimination or separation.

## **A Personal Brush with the Threat of Terrorism**

**By John Parkyn, WisARP President**

On Sunday, February 13, I boarded Amtrak's westbound *Empire Builder* bound for Whitefish, Montana and the ski hill at Big Mountain. I picked up five family members at Minneapolis and we rolled west as we had often before. This time was to be different. A Burnsville, MN man, twenty-four year old Hussein Abdi Hassan, boarded at the Twin Cities stop. He apparently consumed enough alcohol to become somewhat disruptive and Amtrak in keeping with its policy removed him from the train at Browning, MT to make his way to Seattle using a different mode of transportation.

He then informed law enforcement that a bomb device was on the train and we would be blown up. The train was stopped just short of a high trestle between Browning and East Glacier, MT. Within an hour it was surrounded by police cars as it had stopped in the middle of a field. We were told there was a bomb threat and we would be leaving the train right there without luggage.

As we exited the train into fairly deep snow, the winds gusting to 80 mph+ pushed us sideways. We walked across part of the field/swamp through snow and into squad cars of the Glacier County Sheriff and the Montana Highway Patrol. It was cold and frightening to most people. Once driven through the snow to a nearby road, school buses were made available to bus us to the Middle School gymnasium of the Blackfeet Indian Nation in Browning, MT. There throughout the entire night the Blackfeet hosted several hundred of us including providing sleeping bags, pizza and soda. They were fantastic.

The high winds kept the bomb sniffing dog from Great Falls, MT airbase from being brought up by helicopter, so the dog was driven through the storm by four airmen. The train and luggage were extensively searched while we waited. Our personal belongings were then lined up across the gym floor and the dog brought to town to scan all of them. Once cleared, we were taken back to the train parked now in East Glacier and reboarded. We reached Whitefish about 7:30 A.M. rather than 9 P.M. the night before. Most people lost a day of vacation or business due to this ordeal of many hours.

Three people were injured departing the train and were taken to the hospital. Fifty-one trains and crews were backed up due to the threat of a destructive device. The rail cost had to reach \$1M. Hassan was charged with

three counts including public endangerment. This event would have ended without further incident if Hassan had accepted his removal from the train as a consequence of drinking too much, rather than issuing threats. He will now face a trial and is being held on \$100,000 bond. Throughout this incident, the Amtrak staff and the Blackfeet Nation performed admirably.

### **Coalition** *from Page 1*

ideas for shared and individual activities in the coming months and thereafter. "The goal would be to insure next time -- and there will be a next time -- we'll be better prepared as advocates," according to the mission statement.

-- Maintain connections year-round between all of the Rail Coalition organizations allied last year for high-speed rail.

Jesse Auerbach of the ELPC and a frequent participant on the calls says the coalition "allows the ELPC to participate in thoughtful discussions while developing strategy with outstanding state-wide, regional and local passenger rail leadership, and environmental advocacy organizations that have a long-term commitment to transportation reform."

He noted that working connectively between various transportation forms is "a key to passenger rail success."

"To maintain our long-term advocacy," he added, "we need to plan 5 to 10 years ahead among leadership who are not discouraged by outrageous public policy."

A ProRail member who also participates in the calls said the coalition has offered his group "its broadest and most sustained connections with other groups which see the benefits of and support intercity passenger rail development since ProRail's founding 26 years ago. Those connections will be vital in advancing our continuing goal to expand intercity passenger rail service in the state as soon as possible."

*Badger Rails* is published 6 times per year by the Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers, a not-for-profit Wisconsin membership association. WisARP President is John Parkyn, Stoddard, WI, (608)788-7004, email: jdp@dairy.net.com

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WisARP on the Web: [www.wisarp.org](http://www.wisarp.org)

## From the Editor

In this issue on pages 4 and 5 we reprint “Improving Rail Passenger Service in Wisconsin,” WisARP’s rail plan. Our guiding document as set forth by the Board of Directors, the plan is reviewed by the Board periodically in light of progress made and milestones yet to be achieved. If one document tells what we are about, this is it.

- Jim Sponholz

## Join Us in Madison March 26

WisARP members will meet in Madison March 26 at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, 4402 East Washington Ave., Madison. Speakers will include Alan Drake, author and consulting engineer, who will speak on the need to electrify our rail transportation; and Susan Schmitz, President of Downtown Madison, Inc. will discuss the benefits passenger trains can bring for a community’s and region’s economic development (and the costs of killing Madison rail).

The gathering begins with coffee at 9 a.m. and the meeting will be called to order at 10 a.m. Cost is \$25, or \$30 after March 23 (students \$5). Call Mark Weitenbeck (414-541-1112) for registration information.

**Amtrak Ridership Continues to Increase**  
February, 2011 marked 16 consecutive months of Amtrak ridership growth and was the best February on record with 2,099,010 passengers.

“The ridership increase shows the continued popularity of rail travel and the need for continued investment in passenger rail service,” said Amtrak President and CEO Joe Boardman. “We anticipate demand for rail travel will increase with the rise of gasoline prices, and Amtrak is prepared to be there for passengers who want to leave the car behind.”

In Wisconsin, the *Hiawatha Service* was the star performer, with 55,154 passengers in February, up 7.7% from the same period in 2010. For the first 5 months in the current Fiscal Year, ridership is 319,223, up 5.9%.

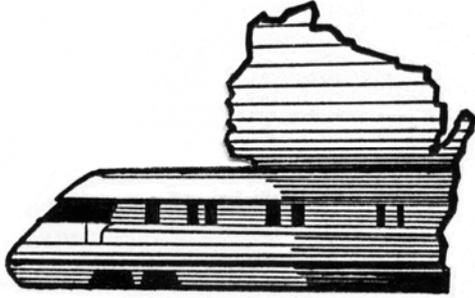
The *Empire Builder* showed a loss for February, with 31,586 riders (down 13.5%). Ridership over the first 5 months of FY2011 is 197,399, down 2.4% from the same period last year.

Train cancellations due to blizzards, freight train derailments and other incidents (see page 6) no doubt had a negative impact on overall *Empire Builder* ridership. Amtrak statistics for January showed that the train had the most delays of any long-distance train, with freight train interference the biggest culprit. On-time performance October through January was 49.8%, down 25.1%.

## Amtrak Turns 40 on May 1

Amtrak will celebrate a milestone birthday May 1 and plans to celebrate in a number of ways. Four locomotives will be repainted in historic paint schemes, a commemorative book is being written, and a documentary DVD will be issued on Amtrak’s place in railroad history (and future).

Also, a special 40th anniversary "exhibit train" will make its debut at the National Train Day event in Washington, D.C. on May 7, 2011, and then travel across the country for a one-year period. There will be no charge for the public to tour the exhibit train.



**Wisconsin Association of  
Railroad Passengers  
(WisARP)**

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