



Federal funds key to putting new rail system on fast track

By *Tim Anderson*

Proponents of bringing high speed rail to the Midwest say the project has picked up substantial regional momentum in the past few years.

But for plans to move forward, excitement about the proposed new transportation system will have to reach Washington, D.C., this year. Federal dollars are needed to pay for a large part of the Midwest Regional Rail System, which calls for passenger trains traveling at speeds of up to 110 mph to connect several Midwestern cities in nine different states.

Decisions on two key legislative bills and 2001 appropriations for Amtrak will be made in 2000, all of which will go a long way in determining the future of high speed rail.

Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson, who has led efforts to bring high speed rail to the Midwest, says states like his would benefit greatly from an investment in the new transportation system.

“High speed passenger rail can provide the people of Wisconsin a safe, convenient and affordable means of travel, while helping bolster our burgeoning economy,” says Thompson, who also is chair of the Amtrak board of directors.

He has gathered support from 26 other governors who will ask the Bill Clinton administration and Congress to provide Amtrak with \$989 million in the 2001 budget, the full funding level for the federally supported transportation organization. Some of that money, in turn, could be invested in the Midwest Regional Rail System.

Bills introduced in Congress also could deliver some of the money needed to buy the equipment and make the infrastructure improvements necessary to create a Midwestern high speed rail system. U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey is sponsoring the High Speed Rail Investment Act, which would give Amtrak the authority to sell \$10 billion in high speed rail bonds over the next 10 years. A proposal by U.S. Sen. George Voinovich of Ohio would give states more flexibility in how they spend federal transportation money, including the ability to transfer highway and transit funds to Amtrak.

Midwestern states must seize this opportunity

to secure federal funding by working together and lobbying as a persuasive coalition, says Terry Mulchahy, deputy director of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation.

Two regional groups have been leading collaborative high speed rail efforts thus far. The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI) is composed of transportation leaders in nine Midwestern states. It has spent the

last few years studying the feasibility of high speed rail and gathering support for the proposed system.

Another ongoing effort in the Midwest is being spearheaded by the High Speed Rail Task Force of the Midwestern Legislative Conference. This group of legislators has met regularly to discuss the future of passenger rail service in the region, and on Jan. 28, members of the task force traveled to Washington,

D.C., to meet with transportation officials.

This year, the task force is introducing its Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact to state legislatures in the Midwest. The agreement would commit participating states to cooperate in promoting the development of passenger rail service in the Midwest.

“The federal government, in some ways, is waiting to see if there is any real interest among states [for high speed rail],” says Minnesota Sen. Sheila Kiscaden, chair of the task force. “We think the rail compact is one way that the states can demonstrate that we have strong interest in passenger rail improvements and in finding ways for our states to make that a reality.”

Like Thompson, Kiscaden believes an improved, more efficient rail service would benefit the Midwest. “We’ve come to think of this as trying to rebuild an interstate passenger system, much like we had federal leadership

Less time, more trips

The Midwest Regional Rail System would cut down on Amtrak travel times between cities and increase the frequency of daily trips between them. Here are some examples.

Amtrak Route	Rail Trips		Rail Time	
	Current	MW Rail	Current	MW Rail
Chicago-Cincinnati	1	6	8:48	4:08
Chicago-Cleveland	3	8	6:32	3:57
Chicago-Detroit	3	9	5:46	3:40
Chicago-Milwaukee	6	16	1:32	1:05
Chicago-Minneapolis	1	6	7:56	5:44
Chicago-Omaha	1	4	9:11	6:53
Chicago-St. Louis	3	9	5:45	3:50
St. Louis-Kansas City	2	6	5:31	4:00

Source: Midwest Regional Rail Initiative

on building the interstate highway system,” the senator from Rochester adds.

Proponents of high speed rail believe the system will allow metropolitan areas to better handle projected population increases. Highway systems cannot handle much more traffic, and air travel is limited or almost nonexistent in some Midwestern cities, says Randall Wade, chair of the MWRRI and passenger rail implementation manager for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation.

Under the MWRRI’s plan, the federal government would pay for 80 percent of the estimated \$4 billion in capital it would cost to build the Midwest Regional Rail System. Participating states would then have to pay the remaining 20 percent. Capital expenditures would be used to improve the safety of railroad crossings, purchase new equipment, renovate tracks and install new signals.

While capital costs are significant, high speed rail’s operating revenues are expected to cover operating expenses. If all goes well, Wade says, more than 9.4 million people could be using high speed rail in the Midwest by 2010. The Midwest Regional Rail System would use Chicago as its hub and cover 3,000 miles of freight railroad lines. Stops would be made in several Midwestern state capitals and in every major metropolitan area. The new system would significantly cut existing Amtrak travel times. For example, a trip from Chicago to Omaha currently takes nine hours and 11 minutes. With a high speed train, the estimated time would be less than seven hours. 