

# Stateline

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This train set, made by Talgo Rail, is one of two finalists being considered by leaders of the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative for use in a future high speed rail network. A picture of the other finalist, designed by Siemens Transportation Systems, can be found on page 7. Negotiations with the two finalists have been halted until federal funding for Midwestern high speed rail is approved. (Photo: Talgo Rail)



## Full speed ahead Regional rail system gaining support, but funding needed

by Laura Kliewer

Advocates of a modernized passenger rail system for the Midwest were cautiously optimistic this fall that they would receive the federal financial backing needed to improve the region's transportation infrastructure. The U.S. Senate's version of the much-discussed economic stimulus package included \$7 billion in tax credit bonding authority for passenger rail development. With this, the goal of implementing a regional high speed passenger rail network appeared within reach.

But, like in past years, the hopes of pro-passenger rail lawmakers and transportation officials were dashed due to congressional inaction. An agreement on a stimulus package could not be reached, leaving supporters with the task of again lobbying for federal funding in 2002.

Despite the setback, passenger rail advocates believe the merits of a more balanced transportation system have become readily apparent in recent months.

"We will continue to be vulnerable to major disruptions of the two primary transportation modes — vehicles and airplanes — whether through catastrophic incidents such as the terrorist attacks or through reliance on a fuel supplied primarily from other parts of the world," argues Missouri Democratic Rep. Joan Bray of St. Louis, chair of the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC). "The addition of efficient passenger rail, including high speed service in major metropolitan

corridors — integrated with airports, highways and public transit systems — would provide the desperately needed balance in the country's transportation system."

Bray and other leaders believe this region is particularly suitable for an improved passenger system that would include the development of a comprehensive high speed rail network. The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI) — a nine-state plan to improve the frequency and speed of passenger rail service in the Midwest — is ready to proceed now with more than \$1 billion in high speed rail projects. Eventually, the proposed \$4.1 billion system envisions a 3,000-mile rail network, with trains traveling up to 110 mph and carrying 9.6 million passengers annually.

Estimates show that high speed rail in the Midwest would create 15,000 jobs during construction and 2,000 permanent jobs during operations. Federal dollars are critical for the project's success because planners are counting on 80 percent of the funding to come from Washington, D.C. States would then provide a 20 percent match, a requirement Midwestern planners have long anticipated.

Most of the major metropolitan areas in this region are within the 100- to 500-mile range from Chicago that many cite as the distance at which passenger rail is the best travel option. In 1997, the Federal Railroad Administration issued a national report on the feasibility of developing high speed rail corridors across the nation. It highlighted a high speed rail corridor, with Chicago as its hub, as one of the best options for high speed rail development in the nation and one that could operate free of subsidies.

"Half of all the remaining passenger rail miles in the nation are in the Midwest," adds Minnesota Sen. Sheila Kiscaden, a Republican from Rochester and vice chair of the MIPRC. "We have a natural hub in Chicago that is well positioned for high speed rail, like the hub-and-spoke concept that the airlines have used successfully, and allows us to connect to all the Midwestern states."

### Federal funding is key

Funding for passenger rail service in the United States is critical for the success of the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative. (Please turn to page 7)

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# Plans call for trains to travel faster, more frequently in region

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States trails well behind the money given to other modes of transportation. In 2001, rail received 1 percent of the total federal transportation budget. In the 2002 transportation budget, highways will receive \$32.3 billion, aviation \$13.3 billion, mass transit \$6.7 billion and the Coast Guard \$5.1 billion. Amtrak was funded at \$521 million.

Indeed, the whole future of U.S. passenger rail now appears to be in question. On Nov. 15, 2001, the Amtrak Reform Council, an independent bipartisan federal commission created by Congress in 1997, voted that Amtrak would not meet the congressional mandate of becoming operationally self-sufficient by December 2002.

The vote set in motion requirements for the reform council to develop a reorganization strategy and for Amtrak to make liquidation plans. This development came less than a year after Amtrak's flagship high speed rail service on the Northeast corridor began, and just as ridership on the *Acela Express* began to exceed projections. Service is still being phased in along the Washington-New York-Boston corridor. Once fully operational, Amtrak officials believe these fast trains will carry nearly 3.9 million riders and net \$180 million annually.

Along with these promising projections and arguments for a more balanced transportation system, proponents also point to polls that show a preponderance of Americans favor intercity rail development. A

recent poll conducted by Ohio State University's Center for Survey Research found that more than eight of 10 Ohio adults want the state government

to develop passenger rail service. Three times as many state residents preferred the train to their next-favored option — flying (59.6 percent to 18.8 percent).

Yet train service doesn't exist between most cities in Ohio and those in surrounding states. In fact, Ohio's largest city, Columbus, has no train service. With very few exceptions, Midwesterners can choose passenger rail as an intercity transportation option only as part of Amtrak's long-distance train service, which travels through the region's cities once a day or less — and often late at night or very early in the morning.

The only exceptions are in Illinois, Michigan, Missouri and Wisconsin, where state departments of transportation pay for additional services, and through a few cities on Lake

Michigan in Indiana and Lake Erie in Ohio, where there are several long-distance trains from the Northeast coming through each day.

About five years ago, regional leaders decided changes needed to be made, causing state transportation officials to create the MWRRI. The plan calls for increasing the frequency and speed of passenger rail service in the region.

If the rail initiative becomes fully operational, train service would more than triple in the region, while significant time decreases would be seen for passengers. For example, train travelers could choose from five Chicago-to-Cincinnati trains daily and get there in less than half the current time of eight hours and 44 minutes. Daily roundtrips between Chicago and Minneapolis would increase from one to six, with more than two hours lopped off the current travel time of over eight hours.

To complement the MWRRI, legislators and governors decided to develop a compact that would promote high speed rail development



This high speed rail train set, one of the finalists being considered by transportation officials in the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative, is called Siemens' American Cities Express (Photo: Siemens Transportation Systems)

in the region, educate others on its benefits and coordinate advocacy efforts. Spearheaded by the Midwestern Legislative Conference's High Speed Rail

Task Force, the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact was first introduced as legislation in 1999 and has been adopted into law in five states (Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and North Dakota) over the past two years. Lawmakers in several other Midwestern states, including Ohio and Wisconsin, plan to introduce the compact legislation in 2002.

## Future federal help

News on the federal level is not as dim for passenger rail advocates as it may seem. First, few expect Amtrak to dissolve. At its Dec. 14, 2001, meeting, the first since it voted that Amtrak would not be operationally self-sufficient by the end of 2002, the Amtrak Reform Council considered nine options for restructuring.

All of the options would introduce some form of competition from private companies or regional authorities. However, the most dramatic alternative — letting the private sector completely run rail service and allowing unprofitable routes to die — appeared to be dismissed by the council.

Rail enthusiasts are also optimistic about the chances of some type of federal high speed rail bonding authority passing in 2002. Legislation will carry over into the new session. Even if an economic stimulus bill does not pass — or fails to include the bonding authority — the High Speed Rail Investment Act can still be considered separately. The fact that the language in the Senate version of the economic stimulus plan closely resembles the House version of the High Speed Rail Investment Act demonstrates a narrowing of the differences that have kept the bill from passing both legislative chambers.

In the long term, advocates hope to see passenger rail service receive a dedicated source of funding, similar to what is given to other modes of transportation. In a Dec. 13, 2001, speech in Chicago, Michael Dukakis, former governor of Massachusetts and acting chair of the Amtrak Board, called for the creation of a \$1.5 billion trust fund, equal to 2.5 percent of the national transportation budget.

"Thirty percent of the population lives within 500 miles of Chicago," he said. "The creation of reliable high speed corridors between regional population centers would dramatically ease the overload on the nation's airports and highways."

Like Dukakis, Kiscaden believes it is time for the country to make more of an investment in passenger rail service. "We built the highway system 40 years ago," she says. "It has served us well but is increasingly congested. Also, dedicated passenger rail service is competitive with air and highways for downtown-to-downtown service and is more productive time for business passengers." ✨

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Sen. Sheila Kiscaden  
Minnesota