



# Future of passenger rail filled with hope and uncertainty

by Laura Kliever

Passenger rail service across the country remains in jeopardy, despite help from the Bush administration days before Amtrak had scheduled a nationwide shutdown of service for July. Amid this uncertainty at the national level, though, efforts to improve passenger rail service in the Midwest continue to move forward.

The country's beleaguered passenger rail system, which has had a history of difficulties and hardships, faced its most dramatic ultimatum to date when new Amtrak President David Gunn announced on June 5 that the organization needed \$205 million to continue to run through the end of this fiscal year, Sept. 30.

Without the loan, Gunn said, he would be forced to shut down operations. The U.S. Department of Transportation ultimately agreed to provide a loan guarantee of about half of what Amtrak needed and requested that Congress supply the rest when it came back after the July 4 recess.

The problems in Washington, D.C., regarding Amtrak's current situation are contrasted by the hope seen in the action taken by state policymakers in Columbus, Ohio, this July. Ohio became the sixth state in the region to join the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC), joining Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and North Dakota. The commission, made up of state

government and private sector appointees, envisions an improved transportation system in the Midwest with passenger trains that run faster, more frequently and with more people on them.



Sen. Jeffrey Armbruster

Sen. Jeffrey Armbruster, chair of the Ohio Senate's Highways and Transportation Committee, shepherded the state's MIPRC bill through both chambers. (The Midwestern Office of The Council of State Governments provides staff support for the MIPRC.)

"Train travel is considered to be more of a novelty in the Midwest, but there will come a time, and the time absolutely is now, that we are going to study the movement of people by train or methods other than the automobile," the Republican from North Ridgeville says.

In his travels through Europe, Armbruster has been impressed at the interconnectivity and comprehensiveness of travel modes on the continent. He believes the same kind of system is possible in the Midwest. Still, those who believe passenger rail could have a promising future also know that it is far from assured. Passenger rail advocates and state officials will watch anxiously in the coming months as key

decisions are made at the federal level.

## The Midwest's interests

However the second stage of Amtrak's bailout plan is handled — by congressional action or through another Department of Transportation loan, as was proposed by the Bush administration in mid-July — within a couple of months, the rail corporation could find itself right back where it was in June.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta has said the administration will only support funding Amtrak at \$521 million — about half of what the company reports it will need for fiscal year 2003 — unless significant reforms are undertaken. Among other requirements, Amtrak would need to agree to transition to being only an operator and run an intercity passenger rail system without government support. Mineta was not explicit about who

would invest in and maintain the passenger rail infrastructure, but he seemed to indicate that the states, rather than the federal government, should take primary responsibility for infrastructure investment.

Passenger rail advocates, including state government groups such as the States for Passenger Rail Coalition and the MIPRC, are fairly unanimous on the need for Amtrak reforms and accountability. But both the extent of the administration's demands and its timeframe have been met with much criticism. State reactions during and after the recent crisis have emphasized the need both to provide the loan that Amtrak needs and to fully fund Amtrak for FY 2003 while decisions on how to best proceed can be deliberated.

States have consistently stressed the importance of the federal government's role in funding passenger rail infrastructure improvements. Randy Wade, passenger rail implementation manager of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and secretary of the States for Passenger Rail Coalition, says that while the states are willing to pay their fair share of the capital costs for improving and maintaining passenger rail service, a funding partnership patterned on the 80/20 federal/state cost sharing of current federal highway, airport and transit programs is necessary.

A July 12 *Washington Post* article indicated that Bush, a former governor, was reluctant to place primary responsibility for passenger rail funding on the states. But, the article says, Mineta apparently convinced him that if states are fully consulted over a long period of time and not

simply imposed upon, they could agree to have a "financial stake" in passenger train service.

## Ensuring a viable future

Several groups are working together on a number of efforts to raise visibility of the need for a viable passenger rail service. In the Midwest, the MIPRC has worked with the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI), unions and advocacy groups to present a unified voice for passenger rail improvements in this region.

In June, the groups presented a set of principles to members of the U.S. Congress from the Midwest. They called on federal lawmakers and the administration to provide enough funding for Amtrak to continue operating all of its trains

until a comprehensive rail plan is developed; for funding specifically geared toward key infrastructure projects such as the MWRRI; for a long-term dedicated funding source; and for a designated

agency to set federal passenger rail policy and ensure accountability.

The MWRRI has worked for six years on a plan that would take an "incremental" approach to high speed rail development, increasing the speed and frequency of passenger rail service through the improvement of existing rail lines.

With speeds increased up to 110 mph and frequencies typically quadrupled from current service, passenger rail would be competitive with auto travel — as well as air in some cases — and cost much less to implement than 125 mph service, which has been introduced in the Northeast. The nine states that have developed the MWRRI plan say this approach is economically justifiable and necessary to build an effective passenger rail system for the region.

However, there is currently no federal funding source for the MWRRI's proposal. With other, larger plans for infrastructure funding on hold, Midwestern high speed rail advocates are seeking reauthorization of the Swift Rail Development Act, with increased funding, so that states with projects that are ready to proceed can move ahead independent of deliberations over Amtrak.

Armbruster says he pushed for Ohio's inclusion in the MIPRC because of the need for Midwestern states to coordinate planning and advocacy efforts.

"We can't do it on our own; we need the public and private sectors joining together, with the states working together as well, to bring commonality on just how we're going to do this," he concludes. ✧