

MIPRC Fall Meeting December 3 & 4, 2008

Overview

The Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC) held its fall meeting in Omaha, Nebraska on December 3 & 4, in conjunction with The Council of State Governments' national annual meeting.

“The meeting was very well-attended, and we certainly had plenty to talk about, especially with the recent enactment of new federal legislation that renews Amtrak’s authorization for five years and provides the first substantive state grant program for intercity passenger rail development,” said Rep. Charlie Schlottach, MIPRC’s chair, who presided over the two-day meeting.

Along with a roundtable discussion on passenger rail developments in all our states, and a presentation on the newly-enacted federal Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act, commissioners heard proposals from two committees that had been established during the commission's spring meeting. Discussion on the report from Illinois Rep. Elaine Nekritz on the Federal Relations Committee focused on the possibility of including funding for passenger rail development in any additional federal economic stimulus package. Commissioners decided that such a proposal should be drafted and submitted to Congressional leaders as soon as possible.

Iowa Sen. Daryl Beall, financial officer for the MIPRC, presented a proposal from the other established committee, Alternate Revenue, to develop a partnership program for commission allies and potential allies. Commissioners agreed that such a program would be beneficial.

The meeting ended with two lively, productive panel discussions, one considering intercity passenger rail’s future, and the other on passenger rail-freight relations.

"The Future of Intercity Passenger Rail" panel included John Drake from the U.S. House Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines & Hazardous Materials, Derrick James from Amtrak and George Weber with the Illinois Department of Transportation. Panelists described the dramatic rise in the number of people taking the train for intercity travel and explained various state approaches to passenger rail development. They also discussed the benefits of the new federal legislation, as well as possibilities for increased emphasis on passenger rail in upcoming federal surface transportation reauthorization.

For the "Views from Rail Owners" panel, the commission was pleased to have representatives from five Class I freight railroads - Kevin Soucie (CN), Tom Drake (CSX Corporation), DJ Mitchell (BNSF Railway), Scott Muir (Norfolk Southern Corporation) and Joe Bateman (UP) - along with Jennifer Macdonald from the Association of American Railroads, as panelists. Panelists described the increasingly cooperative relationship between owners of the rail lines and intercity passenger rail trains that utilize their tracks, and stressed the need for passenger rail planning to include extensive dialogue with freight hosts.