

MIPRC States Upgrading Region's Intercity Passenger Rail Lines

Four years ago, federal lawmakers made a historic funding commitment to passenger rail – billions of dollars for projects that aim to improve intercity and interstate service.

The Midwest has received \$2.5 billion of the money obligated so far under the High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) program (a little more than a quarter of total federal funding) for 39 different projects.

That money is being used by eight states in the region to implement the first phase of a plan to bring faster, more frequent passenger rail service to the region. This plan, known as the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative, envisions a 3,000-mile interstate system of high speed trains traveling to and from the region's largest cities.

In March, during a webinar hosted by the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC), officials from five different states – Michigan, Illinois, Missouri, Indiana and Minnesota – updated MIPRC commissioners on how the new federal dollars are being used.

Michigan

Tim Hoeffner, director of Michigan's Office of Rail, reported that in February the state transferred to Amtrak maintenance of 135 miles of track that it has purchased with HSIPR funds last December. Some improvements have already been made to the mainline track, which was purchased from Norfolk Southern and lies between Kalamazoo and Dearborn on the Chicago to Detroit passenger rail corridor. Major improvements are slated for later this year to bring speeds up to 110 mph. Michigan is currently running 110 mph service on a portion of the corridor, a 125-mile segment of track between Kalamazoo and the Michigan/Indiana border that is owned by Amtrak.

The Michigan DOT is working on a development plan for the entire Chicago to Detroit corridor, and has also executed a contract with General Electric for corridor-wide installation of the company's Incremental Train Control System. The wireless train movement communication replaces and augments existing wayside signaling, allowing for increased train speeds, greater line capacity and improved safety.

Construction of a new passenger rail station for the city of Battle Creek was completed last June. Two additional stations – Troy-Birmingham and Dearborn – are under construction and a study for a new station in Ann Arbor is underway.

Illinois

Joe Shacter, director of Public and Intermodal Transportation for the Illinois DOT explained that his state's signature project is upgrading the Chicago to St. Louis corridor to Class 6 status so it can support 110 mph service. Last Thanksgiving, 110 mph service began on a 20-mile segment and track upgrading of on the entire corridor continues with the freight host, Union Pacific Railroad. To date, more than 180 miles of track has been replaced and concrete ties installed. Initial construction of 13 sidings along the corridor will begin this year, a positive train control system will be installed in 2014 and 2015, and 110 mph service will commence on a much larger portion of the corridor in late 2015. The state is also embarking on the studies that will be needed for the next phases of the project.

Upgrades to rail stations along several corridors are also being made. In Joliet, the state is investing more than \$40 million in a new station and rail infrastructure that will clear up a significant bottleneck. The state is looking to duplicate the success of the new station in Bloomington-Normal, completed last year, which has triggered more than \$200 million in private investment in that downtown area.

The state is also embarking on the studies that will be needed for the next three phases of the project, which are the two ends of the corridor between Chicago and Joliet and between Alton and over the Mississippi River, as well as a large rail-over-rail flyover south of the Springfield area.

Missouri

Missouri DOT's Rail Administrator, Eric Curtit, said that his state has been working for several years to relieve chokepoints and improve on-time performance along its St. Louis to Kansas City corridor. The state received HSIPR funding for nine planning and construction projects. One project has been completed, a universal crossover at Kirkwood junction. Three additional projects – a new bridge over the Osage River, the addition of a third main line at the St. Louis Terminal railroad and a new west approach for a complex of bridges that cross the Mississippi – are under construction. Several other projects – including cross-overs, grade separations, sidings and environmental work – are in the design phase.

MoDOT has also been working on upgrading all rail crossings along the St. Louis to Kansas City corridor. The department received HSIPR funds to address 15 crossings, with 12 upgrades and three closures.

Indiana

Indiana received HSIPR funds for final design and construction of the Indiana Gateway Project, which will improve fluidity and reduce crossing blockages on a critical section of double main track owned by Norfolk Southern in Indiana between the Illinois and Michigan state lines. Agreements were executed in September and the state is in the process of bringing on a consultant to manage the project. The project consists of eight sub projects: four locations where a universal crossover will be added, two where a third main track will be constructed, one where both a universal crossover and a third main track will be added, and one where a passing siding will be added.

“Each of these subprojects will allow trains dispatchers additional alternatives when they are planning their train meets and train passings in and out of Chicago,” said Mike Riley, Indiana DOT's rail section manager.

Some construction and procurement is anticipated to begin this year, and construction is expected to be ongoing through December 2016.

Minnesota

Dan Krom, director of Minnesota DOT's Passenger Rail Office said his state received federal funds to start looking at implementing improved service along the Twin Cities to Chicago corridor. The state has identified a preferred alternative, along the current Amtrak *Empire Builder* route, and is in the process of conducting the Tier 1 environmental study, with the ultimate goal of establishing 110 mph service between the Twin Cities and Chicago by 2017. In the meantime, Minnesota and Wisconsin expect to complete a study this summer on the feasibility of starting a second *Empire Builder* frequency between Chicago and a Minnesota end point.

Amtrak service is scheduled to return to St. Paul this fall, where the completely restored St. Paul Union Depot re-opened in December and has sparked significant commercial and housing development in the surrounding district: the last train left that station in 1976.

The state is looking at establishing an intercity passenger rail connection between Minneapolis and St. Paul, a complex metro area where five percent of the nation's rail traffic travels, and also is planning to undertake a maintenance facility study.

Passenger rail service from the Twin Cities to Duluth ended in 1986, but federally-required environmental work looking at restored service was completed for public comment in March. Krom explained that the planned 110 mph passenger rail service – along a route with a very congested roadway that the state doesn't plan to expand within the next 20 years – is great opportunity to show how a modal mix can affect that part of the state. The state also received HSIPR funds for the project's next phase and service could commence as soon as 2017.

Minnesota is also studying the feasibility of constructing a new, very high speed line between the Twin Cities and Rochester, MN, where the Mayo Clinic is located. MnDOT hopes to have the preliminary environmental analysis for the route completed by 2014.

Midwest Joint Equipment Purchase

Meanwhile, virtually all of Illinois', Michigan's and Missouri's passenger rail routes will be receiving new equipment beginning in 2015. Last fall, Sumitomo Nippon-Sharyo was chosen to manufacture 130 bi-level train cars (88 of which will end up in the Midwest) at its factory in New Rochelle, Illinois. The company's bid was 36 percent below the original cost estimate. Illinois is also leading procurement of new locomotives, with a "Notice to Proceed" expected early next year. All of the equipment will meet new standardized specifications developed under the state-federal Next Generation Equipment Committee and must meet 100 percent Buy America requirements.

A recording of the entire webinar – *Passenger Rail Development in the Midwest: Our History and Plans for the Future* – is available [here](#).