

Badger Rails

Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers (WisARP)

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WisDOT Secretary Gottlieb Addresses WisARP

Speaking for the first time to WisARP members since his appointment as State DOT Secretary by Gov. Scott Walker in 2011, Mark Gottlieb made up for lost time by presenting updates on current rail studies.

He also didn't dodge tough questions posed by members on issues ranging from Madison service to Talgo.

Gottlieb began his talk by discussing the many successful projects the State has been involved in, including:

- The *Hiawatha Service*, which the State has jointly sponsored with Illinois for 25 years, has been a huge success in terms of ridership and passenger revenues.
- Construction of the Milwaukee Airport Station and renovation of the downtown Milwaukee depot into the Milwaukee Intermodal Station.

Gottlieb said contracts have finally been let on the Milwaukee concourse renovation. He said that the project had been delayed while CP Rail looked into scheduling their trains around work time at the station. Most of CP Rail freight trains between Chicago and Minneapolis travel through the concourse area. Gottlieb said an agreement is now in place with CP Rail allowing work to begin.

Gottlieb also updated members on the ongoing study of upgrading the *Hiawatha Corridor*, including increased frequencies and possibly increased speeds of up to 90 mph from the current 79 mph maximum. He said the goal of the study was to find ways to position the corridor to meet future demand.

“The plan we are looking at would add greater amounts of service in the morning, as well as later

departures from Chicago and Milwaukee in the evening for people who might be staying late for business or social purposes,” he said. “Currently with the last train going back to Chicago at 8 o'clock, it makes it difficult for people.”



Mark Gottlieb addressing WisARP members. Photo by Terry Brown

Gottlieb said that the current study task of finalizing conceptual design and cost estimates should be ready in December. Following that the Environmental Impact Statement will be prepared, and public information meetings will be held at that time.

Gottlieb said there likely will be a need for additional capital and operating investments for the upgrades.

“The latest (preliminary) estimates that Amtrak has
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Gottlieb *from page 1*

provided for the study indicate an increase of roughly \$5 million (Wisconsin’s share) when comparing 7 round trip to 10 round trips, using 2019 dollars,” he said.

On whether or not implementation of Positive Train Control (PTC), a developing technology designed to greatly enhance safety on a passenger corridor, could permit higher speeds on existing track at lower costs overall, Gottlieb cautioned that different railroads are experimenting with various systems and the results aren’t in yet.

“The operations modeling that is available cannot yet model operations that reflect PTC implementation,” he said. “However, we do not believe that implementation of PTC (alone) will increase the average operating speed.”

Gottlieb also commented on the MinnDOT-led study to add an additional train between Chicago and St. Paul.

“As you know one of the current problems with the Empire Builder has been the lack of reliability due to the enormous freight traffic generated by the Bakken oil fields. Another round trip to the Twin Cities would greatly improve reliability,” Gottlieb said.

“MinnDOT consultants and CP Rail have completed capacity analyses and simulations, which have helped identify infrastructure capacity improvements that will be needed to accommodate another passenger train, in light of the increased freight traffic.”

Gottlieb said he believed the study, the timing of which was complicated by the additional freight traffic that developed during the project scope, would be out soon.

When asked about the possibility of any future rail service to Madison, Gottlieb termed that as being “a significant way off” given Gov. Walker’s stated opposition from 2010.

“We do have an approved rail plan in place, and one of the reasons for that is to position the State for future federal funding opportunities. But if Madison service was to begin, that is a decision that would need to come from our elected leaders,” he said.

When asked about the lost opportunity to place the

Talgo equipment in operation, Gottlieb largely deferred comment as the issue is still in litigation over the equipment purchase, as well as maintenance base obligations of the contract.

“I was very up-front with the public and the Legislature that if we didn’t get money for the maintenance base, we couldn’t operate the equipment,” he said. “We did a lot of preliminary work on that maintenance base, but it was the Joint Finance Committee’s decision not to release that money.”

Gottlieb went on to say that the State has had “very serious conversations” with the states involved in ordering bi-level cars from Nippon-Sharyo, including Illinois and Michigan. He said he was hopeful that the State could participate to add cars to the 130-car order to equip Wisconsin services.

Gottlieb also commented on the statewide referendum to prohibit raids on the transportation budget (see page 4). He said the referendum would benefit passenger rail, since dollars for those services come from the transportation fund, and strengthening that fund would allow the State to continue to meet its passenger rail funding obligations.

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Empire Builder Faces Another Tough Winter

It's happening again, those failures of nature and machines that were so common last winter on the route of the *Empire Builder*. And winter is just getting started!

On Thanksgiving weekend, landslides occurred on the BNSF railway at Bonners Ferry, ID and between Seattle and Everett, WA. BNSF placed a 3 day moratorium on passenger trains starting Nov. 29 between those Washington cities. Service on the *Empire Builder* was disrupted in both areas until the slides could be cleared.

Then on Dec. 1, a BNSF freight derailment at Wadena, MN stopped the already late eastbound *Builder*. Amtrak terminated that train at Detroit Lakes and bused passengers on to points east. That equipment was hauled via a different reroute to St. Paul where it was turned to become the westbound train out Dec. 2. A "*Baby Builder*" was run from Chicago on that day (and Dec. 3) with a cross-platform transfer made to the westbound equipment Dec. 2 at St. Paul. The westbound train of Dec. 1 was held at St. Paul until the morning of Dec. 2, and proceeded after one track had been reopened at the derailment site.

Sources: Amtrak and Trains Newswire

Meetings Held on Northern Lights Express

The Minnesota Department of Transportation hosted four open houses in December to solicit public input and answer questions on the proposed *Northern Lights Express* (NLX) high-speed rail line between Minneapolis and Duluth, Minn.

The meetings were held Dec. 4 in Superior, Wis.; Dec. 8 in Sandstone, Minn.; Dec. 9 in Cambridge, Minn.; and Dec. 10 in Hinckley, Minn., according to a MnDOT press release. NLX stations have been proposed for Cambridge, Hinckley and Superior, while Sandstone is being considered as a potential site for a light maintenance facility.

The project is being coordinated by MnDOT in consultation with the Federal Railroad Administration, the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance and with cooperation from the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. If built, the NLX would operate on 155 miles of an existing BNSF Railway Co. corridor.

Welcome to All Aboard Minnesota

There is a new pro-passenger rail organization in the Midwest, All Aboard Minnesota, which began operation within the last year.

As listed on their website, All Aboard Minnesota advocates the following priorities:

1. *Adding a second 79 MPH service between the Twin Cities and Chicago on a daytime schedule alternating with the current Empire Builder. Passenger demand on this route is already exceeding current capacity.*
2. *Once this is established, work on extending the train from Minneapolis to Fargo. This would be the easiest service to add across the state, given that the Empire Builder already operates on the line. It would serve St. Cloud and Moorhead, and would use the same train equipment already provided for the Chicago service. We believe this corridor would have just as much ridership as service to Duluth.*
3. *Adding service from the Twin Cities to Duluth and Rochester are future goals, which we support.*
4. *Acquiring a mainline route between Minneapolis and St. Paul for passenger train service should be a top priority. Given the increase in freight train congestion, if we are going to have a successful intercity passenger rail system, we need a dedicated passenger train route between the cities. An opportunity exists to acquire the Canadian Pacific mainline between Midway Station and St. Paul Union Depot. This route would allow all trains to flow through St. Paul Union Depot, rather than having to back in to the depot using alternative BNSF lines.*

Last September, AAM President Brian Nelson and Treasurer Bob Moen went to North Dakota to see firsthand why the *Empire Builder* is running so late and what can be done about it. They witnessed tremendous efforts by the BNSF to increase track capacity, but the results may not be apparent until sometime next year.

WisARP has a number of members from Minnesota, and we encourage them and anyone else interested to check out AAM at: <http://www.allaboardmn.org/>

Report from the Transportation Development Association Annual Meeting

By Terry D. Brown

The Transportation Development Association held their 2014 Annual Meeting on November 19, 2014 in Madison. While once the de facto highway lobby in the state, TDA has broadened its membership base over the years. WisARP is a member of the Association.

Make no mistake, the main purpose of this meeting was to celebrate the success of the Transportation Fund referendum initiative on the statewide November ballot. With success at the ballot box to the number of 80 percent yes votes, the November 4 election provided much to celebrate at this meeting. That celebration was quickly tempered by speakers discussing the current fiscal situation and projections for what lies ahead.

How this celebration related to the freight railroad industry wasn't discussed at all. In particular, how this initiative relates to Wisconsin railroad passengers would be indirect at best. The only remote benefit to Amtrak would come from funding direct to the host freight railroads, which wasn't discussed at all. As for light rail and other metro area mass transportation, discussion was minimal at best.

Opposition to the ballot referendum was light and unorganized. In fact, some organizations that stood to gain from the passage of the referendum were silent on the initiative, such as the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin. The primary argument against the referendum was the state governing bodies needed the flexibility to move transportation income to other areas on demand.

WisARP members that attended the March, 2014 WisARP meeting in the Wisconsin Dells, heard two speakers talk about the shortage of funds in government transportation bank accounts. U.S. Representative Tom Petri spoke of reduced funding in the federal transportation fund, likely due in part to less spending of consumers at the gas pump. Bill Draves, President of the Learning Resources Network, spoke of the trend that the Millennials generation is driving less, and the effect that will have on tax collections at the gas pump.

Five days prior to the TDA meeting the Wisconsin Department of Transportation released its plan to

increase revenue flowing into the transportation account. Secretary of the DOT Mark Gottlieb spoke at the TDA meeting, and details of the plan were discussed. Most in attendance voiced approval of the state plan. For the interest of freight railroads, in particular Wisconsin & Southern Railroad (WSOR), Gottlieb announced this plan includes a \$10 per carload fee on state owned railroad assets.

Nick Goldstein, Vice President of Regulatory Affairs for the American Road & Transportation Builders Association informed the audience that in recent history most state Governors, regardless of political party, which championed gas tax increases were re-elected at the ballot box.

Jim Hill, Executive Director of the LaCrosse Area Development Corporation spoke of the need for all of the parties in this transportation discussion, to use the Big Tent Approach. "We are all in the same boat rowing in the same direction. Our actions need to be bi-partisan," said Hill. He cautioned against pre-conditioned thinking. "We shouldn't be increasing our portion of the pie by belittling another transportation interest."

One critic of the TDA singled out was Bruce Speight, director of the Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group (WISPIRG). Among many priorities expressed by WISPIRG, misplaced priorities in transportation spending has been a growing cry in 2014. Members of the TDA meeting group panel dismissed WISPIRG studies as inaccurate. Urban mass transit, light rail, and even possibly Amtrak could benefit from the initiatives expressed by this non-profit group.

The origins of the ballot referendum started after the revelation that approximately \$1.4 billion was diverted from the transportation fund during the 2000s. A group of road construction companies and associations including the Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association in 2009 started focusing on a measure to stop that diversion of funds. The process matured with the successful ballot vote on November 4, 2014.

www.tdawisconsin.org
www.artba.org
www.transportationinvestment.org
www.wispirg.org

Photos from the October 25, 2014 Milwaukee WisARP Meeting



Milwaukee 4th District Alderman Bob Bauman, one of the staunchest advocates of Amtrak and rail transit on the Common Council, discussed the policy issues surrounding local rail transit projects *Photo by Terry Brown*



Midwest High Speed Rail Association's Shira Orlowek, who discussed high speed rail efforts in Illinois and cross-town connections in the Windy City *Photo by Terry Brown*



Dr. Joseph Schwieterman of DePaul University, who spoke on his research on Chicago rail terminals, published in the book [Terminal Town](#) and celebrated in last September's Terminal Town Festival in Chicago. *Photo by Terry Brown*



WisARP President John Parkyn (right) introducing *Trains Magazine* columnist and veteran journalist Don Phillips *Photo by Terry Brown*

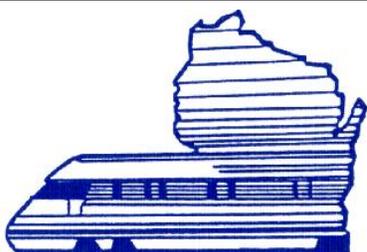


Members gathered for the meeting *Photo by Dave Rasmussen*

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