

MIPRC 2020 YEAR IN REVIEW

Laura Kliewer, MIPRC Director

Presented during MIPRC 2020 Annual Meeting (via Zoom) 11/10/20

The Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission combined our 2019 annual meeting and visit to Capitol Hill, in Washington, D.C., last October to amplify the region's voice as Congress began discussing renewal of the law that sets federal policy and authorizes spending on surface transportation (the [Fixing America's Surface Transportation or FAST Act of 2015](#)), which was set to expire this year.

MIPRC commissioners, partners and allies met over three days of meetings to go over the organization's positions and "asks" for the FAST Act's renewal, to review regional developments since the 2018 Annual Meeting in Milwaukee, Wis., and to hear from both Amtrak and the Federal Railroad Administration regarding their programs and plans for the new fiscal year.

And during a day-long visit to Capitol Hill, commissioners and partners met with 31 federal legislators and their staff from member states. We also hosted a briefing for transportation staffers of Midwestern Members of Congress and Congressional committees with oversight of passenger rail funding. In all our meetings and presentations, we talked about the importance of passenger rail to our member states, and presented MIPRC's requests on renewing the FAST Act, which include:

- Keeping rail as a title within the reauthorization bill's language.
- Sustained funding for intercity passenger rail.
- Reauthorization of, and increased funding for, the FAST Act's grant programs, and inclusion of authorization for the BUILD (formerly TIGER) grant program.
- Keeping Amtrak's national long-distance network intact while its future is studied by Amtrak and the states, while including MIPRC as a stakeholder.
- Concurrence with many of the American Association of State Highway & Transportation's Council on Rail Transportation positions on the FAST Act renewal.

During the 2019 annual meeting we also unveiled a first-ever [MIPRC video](#) explaining our states' vision to protect and expand passenger rail service in the Midwest, and the importance of a strong federal-state partnership to see that vision realized.

Based on input we received from Amtrak, commissioners and Members of Congress during our 2019 annual meeting, MIPRC began an effort to publicize the critical importance of on-time performance of passenger rail service, and the fact that too often freight rail hosts are responsible for the inability of Amtrak to ensure that its trains arrive according to agreed-upon schedules.

We developed a [template resolution](#) for state legislatures to indicate their support for strong passenger rail service and passage of the Rail Passenger Fairness Act ([S.2922](#)), introduced by Illinois U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, to give Amtrak a private right of action in federal court to enforce its access rights. We supported this measure whether as stand-alone legislation or as part of the surface transportation reauthorization.

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Then during the first quarter of 2020, just as Amtrak was experiencing record ridership and revenue on both its long-distance and state-supported routes, a powerful enemy began to show its deadly impact, throw all of our lives into protection mode and come to define the rest of the year – COVID.

All public transportation modes have been hit extremely hard as people have wisely decided to limit travel largely to essential trips only. But trains ARE an essential mode of transportation for many Midwesterners, especially those who live in rural areas. Amtrak worked hard to put security, disinfecting and distancing measures in place to ensure safe travel. And MIPRC worked hard to ensure Amtrak got the funding support it needed.

In [March](#), we strongly supported Amtrak's request for \$1 billion in emergency funding for FY 2020 – including \$200 million to offset state losses – that was ultimately included in the CARES Act COVID-relief stimulus funding.

When Amtrak first gave an indication that they may cut long-distance service to three times a week from daily starting in October, we held a meeting via telephone with Amtrak officials, and then communicated the news to MIPRC commissioners and partners, along with the metrics Amtrak planned to use to determine when daily service would be restored.

- We pressed Amtrak on the dollar amount in relief funding they would need in order to not cut service, and communicated that to Members of Congress, urging them to include the funding in whatever legislative vehicle that might pass before the end of September.
- We worked with the Rail Passengers Association (formerly NARP) to communicate state-by-state information on the dire economic toll that cutting long-distance service would impose on the communities that depend on Amtrak as an essential service.
- And, we held a webinar, kindly hosted by [Alliance for Regional Development](#), highlighting the importance of maintaining our current daily long-distance passenger rail service. Thank you very much to the Alliance, and to MIPRC officers Bob Guy and Rep. Sharon Negele for presenting.
- We supported [HR 6800](#), the Heroes Act COVID stimulus bill that passed the U.S. House and included the funding Amtrak needs to restore daily service sooner rather than sometime in the future.

And we continue to press Congress on this and other issues.

From April to June, when the Administration and Congress were considering putting forth an infrastructure stimulus bill, we wrote emails to Midwestern MOCs asking that passenger rail receive substantive funding in any such stimulus.

In June, MIPRC applauded the U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee for developing the TRAIN Act with its surface transportation reauthorization legislation, The Moving Forward Act ([HR 2](#)). The Train Act will reauthorize most of the rail provisions contained

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in the FAST while making important and significant improvements. We also [communicated to Congress](#) some measures we want to see included in the final legislation, including

- Stronger Long-Distance Service Mandates;
- Clarifying that States that Don't Operate intercity passenger rail are not Railroads;
- Increased Funding for Restoration & Enhancement Grants; and
- reauthorization of The Next Generation Corridor Equipment Pool Committee and Operation Lifesaver

We also asked that the level of funding for the first year of the act, FY 21, be upped for Amtrak due to the effect of the pandemic and its subsequent planned cuts to long-distance service starting on Oct. 1.

Throughout, we have communicated with our commissioners and partners on key surface transportation reauthorization, Amtrak long-distance and other issues, encouraging them to also contact their Members of Congress.

We have also been hard at work on several other fronts, including two important FRA projects:

FRA-Led Planning Project

MIPRC continues to partner with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to develop a strategic 40-year vision for the Midwest's passenger rail network, service, financing and governance. In 2015, the Midwest was chosen as one of two regions to participate in an FRA-led multistate rail planning process. The region was chosen based on MIPRC's Statement of Interest and Qualifications submitted on behalf of the Midwest in November 2014.

MIPRC and 12 Midwestern state DOTs are the lead stakeholders for the project (the [Midwest Regional Rail Plan](#)). Thirty supporting stakeholders include local governments, MPOs, railroads, public and private passenger rail operators, transit agencies, and other regional and statewide planning organizations.

We are excited about the progress of the project. You'll be hearing from Peter Schwartz of the FRA in detail about this later today, so I'll leave you in suspense until then.

FRA Rule on Metrics and Minimum Standards for Intercity Passenger Rail

Amtrak and the FRA developed a proposed rule to measure and give minimum standards on a number of intercity passenger rail service issues – and to provide remedies when service is poor; the most important to MIPRC and our states being on-time performance of intercity passenger rail. We believe Amtrak and the FRA have developed within this proposed rule a strong, fair process to identify freight host-caused service delays and establish a process for addressing those issues, and we testified as such during FRA's public hearing on the proposed rule. We followed up that testimony with [written comments](#) submitted through the formal docket process and supplied some recommendations to make the final rule even better. FRA's Paul Nissenbaum will be speaking during this meeting and will update us on the progress of finalization of the rule.

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Shifting gears, I'll conclude my year in review on a rather mundane note, but one which I want to make sure you all are aware of. In June, we started experiencing problems with our website, and since July, we have been unable to post any new content to it. We worked with our web developer, initially to try and fix it, and then eventually, giving the go-ahead (with the MIPRC officers' blessing, as you will see in the FY 21 budget which will receive final approval by the full commission tomorrow) to upgrade the website, which has involved development of a whole new site, similar to our "old" one, but much more secure and also more cell-phone friendly, etc. We're in the process of moving content from the old site to the new one, which should be up and running soon.