

MIPRC 2020-21 Year in Review

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It's been a year wherein Zoom and other means of virtual communication made a lot possible! The Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission annual meeting – which was held via Zoom on November 10-11, 2020, because the COVID-19 pandemic prevented meeting in person here in Detroit last year – was a record-breaking one for meeting attendance. During the two-day meeting, commissioners, partners and allies discussed state and regional developments in passenger rail, including the COVID-19 pandemic's effects, the Commission's positions and "asks" on federal surface transportation re-authorization (the [Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act of 2015](#), which was set to expire in 2020 but was continued for another year), and the Commission's priorities for 2021. They also heard from Amtrak and the Federal Railroad Administration about their respective plans and outlooks for 2021.

Commissioners elected for another year Bob Guy (Illinois) as chair and Rep. Sharon Negele (Indiana) as financial officer of MIPRC. David Simon (Wisconsin) – who had moved to the private sector from WisDOT earlier in the year – was re-elected as vice chair on a temporary basis until WisDOT's Arun Rao's appointment as the Wisconsin governor's designee was finalized early in 2021.

A full recounting of the 2020 MIPRC Annual Meeting, including PowerPoint slides, is in your packets (and will be uploaded to the chat for virtual attendees).

While the ongoing pandemic prevented MIPRC's annual visit to Washington, D.C., in both 2020 and this year, the Commission was actively communicating via email to Midwestern members of Congress its positions on:

- legislation for restoring daily long-distance service as part of COVID relief and/or FY 2021 appropriations ([Dec. 15 letter](#) and [Jan. 28 letter](#)); and
- the House's surface transportation re-authorization bill, [H.R. 3684](#), and the Senate's [Bipartisan Infrastructure Framework](#);

We also wrote supporting President Biden's initial plan to invest \$80 billion in passenger rail ([April 20 letter](#)), and then that along with FAST Act renewal and Amtrak's Fiscal Year 2022 grant request ([May 14 letter](#)).

As part of the Congressional outreach, the Commission called for reform of Section 209 of the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 to reduce the threshold for requiring state support from 750 miles to 250 miles.

This reform was [added to our Surface Transportation Reauthorization Principles](#) and subsequently shared with Midwestern members of Congress ([July 23 letter](#)), AASHTO and other organizations. We also [posted a history and rationale](#) for the proposed change on MIPRC's website and created a one-sheet handout for distribution at the AASHTO CORT meeting held last month in Milwaukee. A copy of both our current reauthorization principles and the handout on Section 209 reform is in your meeting packets (and will also be posted in the chat).

Following up on a priority identified during the 2020 Annual Meeting, we also explored what federal funding might be available to continue regional planning efforts to implement the Midwest Regional Rail study once it was released. At the end of March, we held a Zoom meeting with commissioners

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and partners who volunteered to help brainstorm and strategize, and they helped us come up with the language we ended up incorporating into our reauthorization principles on this issue.

In April, we had a Zoom meeting on the subject with FRA's Paul Nissenbaum and Peter Schwarz to pick their brains on the issue; thank you, Peter, for helping set that up. Then, FRA Deputy Administrator and nominee for Administrator Amit Bose invited MIPRC officers and staff to chat with him about our priorities during a Zoom meeting in early May.

We are grateful for all those conversations and pleased that current surface re-authorization legislation pending in Congress does contain funding for MIPRC and other regional entities to continue regional planning efforts to implement regional rail studies. We are disappointed, however, that Sec. 209 reform was not included. We continue to work with allied organizations to press for that threshold change.

Another priority commissioners had identified for this year was working to ensure that the Minnesota Legislature enacted funding for that state's share of the local match required for a federal \$31.8 million CRISI grant to make the second daily Twin Cities-Milwaukee-Chicago train a reality. MIPRC worked with Minnesota Commissioner Rep. Alice Hausman and advocates to come up with a strategy, and Rep. Hausman saw it to the finish line; the Minnesota Legislature approved \$10 million in an omnibus spending bill signed by Gov. Tim Walz in late June, clearing the way for final engineering and construction to begin. Service is anticipated to begin in 2024.

Two other MIPRC priorities for 2021 that were decided on during last year's annual meeting included:

1. Continued work on getting federal surface transportation re-authorization legislation passed that includes MIPRC's priorities – you heard earlier in my report what we have done on that issue; and
2. Continued pressing for restoration of daily long-distance service, which had been cut back to three roundtrips a day on most routes, from once daily, due to pandemic-related lack of ridership. As you know, daily long-distance service was restored starting in June after Congress provided stimulus funding to allow Amtrak to do so – yay!

Throughout the year, I gave several presentations via Zoom, including:

- To the Rail Passenger Association (formerly NARP) on state-supported passenger rail service.
- For a Kansas passenger rail hearing hosted by Sen. Carolyn McGinn.

I was also invited to be a stakeholder in giving feedback on INDOT's rail plan (several Zoom meetings), and Jon and I helped the Missouri Passenger Rail Advisory Committee (MORPAC) come up with a strategy to work to ensure that the Missouri Legislative Assembly included enough funding in the state's budget for the *Missouri River Runner* to continue service.

Efforts were made by Iowa and Ohio legislators and advocates to gain traction for those states rejoining the compact, and both Jon and I worked with those parties during their legislative sessions.

And last, but certainly not least, most recently, MIPRC and the FRA worked together to jointly release the [Midwest Regional Rail Plan](#) just yesterday at Chicago Union Station in a fitting start to our 2021 Annual Meeting.

Before I turn us to the next agenda item, I'd like to take a moment to remember former Missouri MIPRC Commissioner and Senator Ed Emery; we were saddened to learn of his death in early August, while he was campaigning for a Congressional seat.