

MIPRC 2024 Year in Review

Presented by Laura Kliewer, MIPRC director, on Nov. 19, 2024 (during MIPRC 2024 Annual Meeting)

From new grants to a to new train to a new employee, the past 12 months have been among some of the most eventful in MIPRC's history. This story began when we met just over a year ago in Chicago and Normal. Last year's meeting began at Chicago Union Station a briefing on plans for the renovation of its terminal and platform facilities, followed by a tour to see where, and why, the work is needed, followed by a trip on the state-supported *Lincoln Service* to Normal. Upon our arrival in Normal, we were greeted by city of Normal officials and treated to a brief presentation about the station's development and its role in anchoring Normal's ongoing downtown revival.

After convening the next day and receiving a welcome from Mayor (and now Amtrak board member) Chris Koos, we spent the next day and a half discussing MIPRC's grant applications, as well as hearing updates and progress on developments in our states and federal rail programs, and the Federal Railroad Administration's Long-Distance Service Study. We also heard from Quandel Consultants on their role in numerous projects across the Midwest.

Commissioners also approved the budget and elected officers for 2024, including Beth McCluskey, director of intermodal growth for T.Y. Lin International, as chair; Peter Anastor, director of the Michigan Department of Transportation's Office of Rail, as Vice Chair; and Scott Rogers, director of governmental affairs and workforce director for the Eau Claire (Wisconsin) Area Chamber of Commerce, as Financial Officer. We thank them for their service to the commission.

A copy of the complete meeting minutes from the 2023 Annual Meeting can be found [here](#).

After our last gathering but before 2023 was out, we learned that 20 corridors that are part of the Midwest's long-term passenger rail network were included in the FRA Corridor Identification and Development Program's first round of projects. And in 2024, MIPRC was awarded two grants, hired a new marketing and graphics staffer, welcomed the *Borealis* train into the Twin Cities-Milwaukee-Chicago corridor, and renewed our annual federal briefing visit to Washington, D.C. A few more details on some of those

Corridor ID

In December 2023, we all learned that 20 intercity passenger rail corridors proposed by MIPRC-member states, and supported by MIPRC, were accepted by the Federal Railroad Administration into the inaugural round of the Corridor Identification and Development Program. We will be hearing more about the program from the FRA this afternoon, and more about each specific project during our upcoming state DOTs updates. In your meeting packets, there is a [flyer we developed](#) with a bit of information on each project and showing visually how these projects are building out the FRA Midwest Regional Rail Plan, which was developed with strong input from MIPRC and our member states, and released in 2021.

D.C. Visit

In May, a delegation of MIPRC commissioners and DOTs from our member states traveled to Washington, D.C. to visit with and brief Midwestern members of Congress and their key transportation staffers, as well as Congressional transportation committees' staffers, about passenger rail developments in our region. Our delegation also thanked members for supporting the IIJA's passenger rail programs asked for their support in funding them to their fully authorized levels. We also publicized that MIPRC was applying for Invest Midwest via CRISI and asked

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Members of Congress to consider writing letters of support for the application, which many did (even with the short timeframe – the application was due just a week and a half after our return).

I'd like to thank all of MIPRC's commissioners and DOTs who participated, most of whom are also here at this meeting:

- Representing Illinois: Beth McCluskey, MIPRC Chair
- From Indiana, INDOT's Marty Blake as well as Rep. Mike Aylesworth
- From Kansas, Kansas DOT's Martin Alvarez, and Sen McGinn
- From Michigan: MIPRC's vice chair Peter Anastor, and Sen. Roger Victory
- From Minnesota, MnDOT's Greg Mathis, and Sen. Kupec
- From Missouri, MoDOT's Troy Hughes
- Sen. Wobbema joined us from North Dakota; and
- From Wisconsin, MIPRC's financial officer Scott Rogers, as well as WisDOT's Jen Murray. We were also pleased to have WisDOT's Secretary Craig Thompson, who was president of AASHTO at the time, join us.

I'd also like to thank Barley Fields from AASHTO, who is here with us today, and Shayne Gill for providing their beautiful DC office for our group to meet in.

Grants

A good amount of our time since the last annual meeting has been spent applying for or going through the obligation process for receiving federal grants, something quite new to the commission's work and part of our planned evolution.

As you know, MIPRC in mid-March received an Interstate Rail Compacts Program grant of up to \$300,000 for two years from the FRA. And just last month, we were so happy to learn of the CRISI Program grant award of up to \$1.84 million for "Invest Midwest: The Future of Midwestern Passenger Rail – Phase 1," our planning project to advance and expand the network envisioned in the FRA's 2021 Midwest Regional Rail Plan.

We will be speaking more about these grants this afternoon, but it's worth noting that you're already seeing some of the fruit of the compacts grant; many of the materials in your packets were designed by Cherylyn. She joined us last month and has quickly proven to be a valuable addition to MIPRC's staff. In addition to design work, she will be helping us with outreach and an overhaul of our website.

To wrap up, I'd like to talk a little bit about the FRA Long-Distance Study . . . after the presentation on the FRA Long-Distance Study at last year's MIPRC annual meeting – given by Frank Loetterle, who is with us today (he was leading that project then and is now with Quandel Consultants) – MIPRC and our member states continued to provide input into the FRA's ongoing Congressionally-mandated study that will ultimately recommend the creation of new long-distance passenger rail routes to more equitably serve the whole country.

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The FRA held two stakeholder workshops after last year's annual meeting. After the third workshop – which was held in February – MIPRC and our member states jointly submitted comments (as we had done after the previous two workshops).

While I am dismayed to report that these joint comments – as well as other stakeholders' input after the 3rd workshop such as Rail Passengers Association, the HSR Alliance, ELPC and the Greater Northwest Passenger Rail Association – were, let's just say, overlooked in favor of some AI-generated popularity ratings of how many people said a certain route was their "favorite" – as you will see from our 3rd joint comments, we were pleased with the work the FRA had done with a very difficult task up to then. And we eagerly await their final report to Congress, which is being drafted now.

We had wanted to have those working on the draft to present at this meeting but since they are in the process of writing their report to Congress, they can't present; we have asked them to allow MIPRC to hold a webinar once they submit the report to Congress.

You can read more about MIPRC's activities on our website, miprc.org, and by following us on X; the address is @MW underscore Rail (@MW_Rail. And soon you'll be able to sign up for our new e-newsletter. We'll be discussing more about that on Wednesday morning, including focus sessions to help us refine the final product.