

Wisconsin Freight Advisory Committee (FAC) Meeting 21

Meeting Minutes from Tuesday, April 21, 2026

9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Held in-person in Madison, Wisconsin

FAC Member Organization Representatives (33, from 30 organizations / offices): Peter Andrews, Kurt Baumann, Travis Black, Mark Brehmer, Mei Cao, Maria Cartier, Tim Fiocchi, Ira Frydman, Ana Garic, Steve Griffith, Kari Heinrich, Chris Hiebert, Matthew Hovar, Grace Howe, Melissa Hunt, Debby Jackson, Wil Kultgen, Ken Lucht, Kristi Luzar, Evan Miller, Eric Peace, Richard Pingel, Dean Prestegaard, Henry Schienebeck, Sandi Siegel, Anupam Srivastava, Richard Stewart, Linda Swann, Evan Umpir, Don Vruwink, Mike Wenzholz, Thomas Winker, Travis Zarembo.

Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) Members Present (29): Secretary Kristina Boardman, Assistant Deputy Secretary David Hubbard, Angela Adams, Stephanie Arduini, Brad Basten, Lt. Bill Berger, Rebecca Burkel, Scott Edmunson, Montana Fallon, Joel Gonzalez-Santiago, Nate Goodell, Karla Knorr, Dave Leucinger, Merrill Mechler-Hickson, Justin Litscher, Todd Merchant, Jennifer Murray, Claire Paprocki, Hillary Pelton, Dave Schroeder, Izzy Schultze, Justin Shell, Sarah Simonson, Kamden Stark, Lisa Stern, Matt Sudac, Patrick Tubbs, Matt Umhoefer, Chuck Wade.

Guests Present (9): Aimee Andres, Jim Best, Adam Binsfeld, Brian Dranzik, Matt Hoffman, Eric Oberhart, Vanessa Perry, Jack Rabenn, Benji Timm.

Welcome (9:30 a.m.)

Chuck Wade, Division of Transportation Investment Management (DTIM)

Mr. Wade introduced Dave Schroeder as WisDOT's new Freight Program Officer, then welcomed attendees and reviewed the agenda and contents of the meeting folders.

Opening Remarks (9:35 a.m.)

Kristina Boardman, WisDOT Secretary

Secretary Boardman noted the importance of the FAC to helping WisDOT understand the freight sector, including their needs. She thanked the FAC members who assisted in development of the survey for the Truck Parking Study; the final results of the study are expected to be released later this year. She summarized some of the department's accomplishments, including 9,600 miles of improved roads and 2,400 repaired or replaced bridges; these are helping address first- and last-mile issues. Secretary Boardman also noted the projects on I-41 in the Fox Valley, the I-94 East-West corridor in Milwaukee, and the I-39/90/94 corridor between Madison and the Wisconsin Dells, which was recently enumerated by the Transportation Projects Commission. She also expressed satisfaction that the federal funding for the Blatnik Bridge replacement in Duluth-Superior has been secured. Wisconsin and Minnesota are each contributing \$400 million toward this project; each year, 265,000 trucks carrying nearly \$4 billion in goods pass over the bridge.

Secretary Boardman also highlighted the Agricultural Roads Improvement Program (ARIP), which has funded 120 projects since its creation, easing transportation for 23 million tons of agricultural products. There is now a \$30 million set-aside for culverts and small bridges within that program. She noted the

Harbor Assistance Program has announced the recipients of \$7.5 million in grants – Green Bay, Manitowoc, Marinette, Milwaukee, and Sturgeon Bay. Secretary Boardman also noted the federal port and shipyard infrastructure funding programs that will be discussed on the panel sessions; she encouraged attendees to consider applying for those funds and offered WisDOT staff assistance.

Secretary Boardman said the department is looking forward to completion of the Milwaukee Air Cargo center this fall, noting that WisDOT helped the airport secure funding for a portion of the project. She also said WisDOT was committed to utilizing all federal funding opportunities available, and supporting AASHTO's platform for Transportation Funding Reauthorization, which states the baseline should be existing levels, adjusted for inflation. Funding should also be sustainable and formula funding (rather than discretionary funding) should be emphasized.

Secretary Boardman concluded by again thanking the attendees for their involvement in improving freight programs and freight transportation systems.

FAC Membership Update and Recap of the 20th FAC Meeting (9:40 a.m.)

Justin Shell, DTIM Administrator

Justin Shell began by noting two new members to the FAC: Poonam Arora, representing the Madison International Trade Association; and Wil Kultgen, representing the Specialized Carriers & Rigging Association. He then noted how the last budget led to enumeration of a project for the I-39/90/94 corridor north of Madison. He then went through a summary of the previous FAC meeting, which focused on truck freight and highway systems. The themes of the three panels at that meeting were: Safety, Security, and Resilience; Harmonization and Collaboration; and Operations, Mobility, and Efficiency. The meeting also included a discussion and summarization of the state Biennial Budget. For a full summary of the 20th meeting, please reference the meeting minutes on the FAC webpage.

Then, Mr. Shell shared observations from his trip to Savannah, Georgia for the AASHTO Spring Meeting. Savannah is a major port city, and he joined the Water Transportation Committee for a tour. The first things he said he noticed were the giant cranes – and then noticed they were manufactured by Kone (a company that manufactures smaller cranes in Wisconsin). The photos he shared showed the scale of this equipment, bridging over several rail tracks at a time. The port handles six to seven overseas container vessels each day; the efficiency of the port's operations allows incredible cargo volumes each day.

He noted that the primary bridge over the harbor still has a 20-year life expectancy remaining, but it required maintenance to replace the tension/suspension cables. In an unusual process, this existing bridge is being slowly raised as suspension cables are replaced – even as the roadway remains open. When the cable replacement is finished, the bridge deck will be 20 feet higher than present, allowing taller vessels to enter the port. The next generation of harbor crossing for motor vehicles will be either a taller bridge or perhaps a tunnel.

ARIP – Wisconsin Agricultural Road Improvement Program (ARIP) – Update (9:50 a.m.)

Merrill Mechler-Hickson, WisDOT

Hillary Pelton, WisDOT

Izzy Schultze, WisDOT

Tom Winker, Wisconsin Towns Association / East Wisconsin Counties Railroad Consortium

In a follow-up presentation from FAC Meeting 20, Merrill Mechler-Hickson began by re-introducing his

staff members, and acknowledging the presence of both co-chairs of the ARIP Board. Hillary Pelton provided an overview of the program's current status. The ARIP program has been continued for a second budget, with state reimbursement up to 90 percent for approved projects. The budget approved \$120 million of programmatic funding for ARIP, plus \$30 million for the new Local Small Structures Improvement Program (LSSIP) She added that reimbursements are now being issued quarterly so that local governments will not have to wait as long.

For the first round in the new budget, \$50 million was made available, Ms. Pelton said. From that solicitation, 122 eligible applications were received, requesting \$224 million in ARIP support. From these, 29 projects in 28 counties were selected. The most frequent agricultural commodity benefitting from these projects is grain (64 percent of awarded projects), followed by animal products (59 percent) and fruit and vegetable crops (53 percent). Dairy (45 percent) and forestry (23 percent) also benefit; more than half of projects (53 percent) have "other" agricultural beneficiaries. To date, 469 producers with sales of \$13 billion have benefitted from ARIP improvements, helping improve transportation of 23.2 million tons of agricultural products and supporting 8,900 jobs.

Ms. Pelton noted that Round Two of the current ARIP cycle is expected to open on April 29, with a two-month application window for \$70 million of available funding. Following committee reviews in the July-September window, the announcement of winners is expected in October or November.

Next, Tom Winker added brief comments on behalf of the Wisconsin Towns Association, expressing gratitude for the program and its importance to the road network in rural Wisconsin. He emphasized the partnerships involved, noting his other role on a rail transit commission, and the urgency in moving more freight to railroads.

The presentation then turned to the LSSIP program. Izzy Schultze explained that this was a new program that uses a one-time \$30 million set-aside from ARIP, targeting deteriorated culverts and small structures (6 to 20 feet in length) for repair or replacement. Eligible structures must be given a structural rating of 4 (poor) or lower, determined by a certified bridge inspector. Structures must be owned by a local unit of government and have a design life greater than ten years. Of note, Ms. Schultze said storm sewer systems are not eligible. Communities with eligible structures will be limited to two applications for structures in the "poor" category (rated 3 or 4) but will be unlimited for structures in the "severe" category (rated 0 to 2). The application process opened on February 3 and closes on May 1. As of the presentation, 125 applications had been received, with 17 in the "severe" designation and 72 rated at 3 ("poor"). The selection process will be conducted in May and June, with awards announcements anticipated for July. One FAC member asked about how to find out the ratings for these structures; Ms. Schultze said that information was available on WisDOT's LSSIP page.

Great Lakes Maritime Freight Panel (10:10 a.m.)

Lisa Stern, WisDOT (Moderator)

Mike Wenzholz, Duluth-Superior Metropolitan Interstate Council

Eric Oberhart, Great Lakes / St. Lawrence Seaway Governors and Premiers

Benji Timm, Port Milwaukee

Eric Peace, Lake Carriers Association

For the first of two panels on maritime freight, Lisa Stern began with an overview of the state's commercial ports. Wisconsin currently identifies 29 port locations as commercial ports, and thus eligible

for assistance under the Harbor Assistance Program. The three ports with more than one million tons of cargo are all on the Great Lakes: Superior (14.1 million tons in 2023), Milwaukee (2.2 million tons), and Green Bay (2.0 million tons). Iron ores and bituminous coal comprise the vast majority of the tonnage at Superior. Milwaukee's top commodities by tonnage include fertilizer components, Portland cement, unclassified chemical preparations, miscellaneous nonmetallic minerals (such as salt), and concrete products. Green Bay's top commodities by tonnage include broken stone or riprap, petroleum refining products, Portland cement, fertilizer components, and unclassified chemical preparations.

The first panelist, Mike Wenzholz from the Duluth-Superior Metropolitan Interstate Council (MIC, the MPO for the Twin Ports) discussed how freight planning is coordinated in his region. He noted the Twin Ports are the westernmost location in the 2,300-mile Great Lakes – St. Lawrence Seaway System that extends through the Great Lakes to the St. Lawrence River and out to the Atlantic Ocean. Although located at the center of the continent, the Ports connect by water to the rest of the world (especially Europe) and to the Pacific Coast by rail.

As an MPO, the MIC handles regional transportation planning across a 641 square mile area in two states, Mr. Wenzholz said. The MIC-led Harbor Technical Advisory Committee (HTAC) is a core entity for connecting the stakeholders in the region. Members include local, state, and federal governments; regional authorities; harbor-related business sectors, and citizen groups. Although there are 34 formal members, meetings routinely attract 50 to 60 attendees to the forum, learning about and offering comments on issues from dredging to freight movement to environmental preservation and restoration. The diversity is purposeful, and as an MPO committee it appears to be unique among regional freight planning.

Mr. Wenzholz observed the economic connections the harbor has with the community as a critical factor in bringing together the HTAC; the group discussed complex problems that require coordinated management strategies. The HTAC allows others to know who to talk to regarding specific issues and provides an opportunity for others to understand the general positions of other members. Inputs are group-generated, which aids in relationship-building. However, the HTAC itself has no legally-binding decision-making authority.

Next, Mr. Wenzholz displayed a graphic of the harbor area showing the extent of the federally designated and maintained channels, the local land use plan for properties along the channels, and a graphic combining both that shows the integration of maritime freight with land use. He said the federal maintenance of the channels was critical to the port; there is no shipping without it. The Port Land Use Plan is a decade old and has varying degrees of implementation; Mr. Wenzholz observed it reflects a balance of interests that provides the best use of existing assets. It also demonstrates the importance of investing in lands next to the channels.

In recent years, the harbor has benefitted from several infrastructure improvements. The HAP was extremely important for dock wall repairs and other upgrades for both Fraser Shipbuilding and C. Reiss. On the land side, Mr. Wenzholz noted the redesign of the Twin Ports Interstate interchange which now allows for freer movement of OSOW loads. Previously, the wind tower components such as blades had to follow a "Billy Goat Trail" of local roads to climb uphill from the harbor.

Activity by Duluth Cargo Connect was slowed in 2025 by several factors that made it a poor shipping year, Mr. Wenzholz said. Shipping with Canada was a significant issue that led to fewer ship arrivals, and lower overall tonnage for all the major bulk commodities. The current trade policies make for volatile

and unpredictable changes for port businesses. On the positive side, it was a good year for breakbulk and heavy-lift cargoes; wind energy components were a large part of this volume. He also noted the growth of Great Lakes cruises, which had an economic impact of almost \$837,000 in 2025.

Finally, Mr. Wenholz noted the new domestic / Great Lakes shipbuilding alliance between Fraser, Fincantieri, and Donjon. Patrick Kelly (Fraser President) has noted that by working on new projects together, the three companies can shrink the project timeline for vessel construction. One top goal they have is for construction of up to seven new icebreaking vessels for the U.S. Coast Guard. Currently, there is only one U.S. icebreaker for all of Lake Superior.

The next perspective on Great Lakes cargo shipping came from Eric Oberhart of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors & Premiers (GSGP). The GSGP is a bi-national collaborative organization constituted from the eight states and two Canadian provinces that border the waterway system; the ten chief executives of these entities provide oversight. The agency goals focus on regional economic development and water management and protection. WisDOT and the Wisconsin Department of Administration are members of the GSGP Steering Committee.

The GSGP's critical policy document is the Regional Maritime Initiative, Mr. Oberhart said. The three primary goals are to double maritime trade, to shrink the environmental impact of the region's transportation system, and to support the region's industrial core. As a regional network, the Great Lakes / St. Lawrence Seaway (GLSLS) moves 250 million tons of cargo per year, supporting \$50 billion in annual economic activity across more than 100 ports. Cargoes vary, depending on whether they stay in-basin or go overseas. The bulk commodities most frequently moved across the region include iron ore, coal, aggregates, and cement. For overseas cargo, steel, grain, machinery, and intermodal containers are regular shipments.

Mr. Oberhart said that market outlook for the GLSLS is mixed. At present, he said only 50 percent of the shipping capacity is being used; volumes are half of what had been shipped in the 1970s. There has been a long-term decline in coal, and iron ore is sensitive to markets. However, he sees opportunities in intermodal containers; existing ports at Cleveland and Duluth are likely to be joined by new facilities in Monroe, Michigan; Burns Harbor, Indiana; and at a port in Ontario. He also noted petroleum movement has created an 'energy corridor.' One challenge that remains is the seasonality of operations; the general trend is for longer operation seasons, but that there is still variability from season to season or in different parts of the basin. The system does need more icebreakers to address end-of-season and start-of-season shipping.

The system offers an investment opportunity, Mr. Oberhart said, since the assets are already in place and have integration with and connections to other modes. The opportunities he identified include looking for new cargo opportunities and trade lanes, modernizing existing infrastructure, and marketing the system to shippers and freight forwarders (especially in Europe). He noted most states in the region have published reports that establish maritime strategies and policies; for Wisconsin, policies are in the 2015 Wisconsin Commercial Ports Development Initiative, which was a multi-agency effort. Across the region, common themes include investing in the maritime system, as the Harbor Assistance Program has done in Wisconsin. Another theme is that of shipbuilding and ship repair in a manner that builds on the concentration of industrial capacity in the region, in both the U.S. and Canada. Finally, he noted the potential that cruise tourism offers as an economic development opportunity that is growing rapidly.

Presentations continued with Benji Timm discussing operations at Port Milwaukee. He noted the port area has three operational areas – the North Harbor Tract, which is recreational; the South Harbor Tract’s commercial area; and dock facilities that include Great Lakes cruising via the Lake Express ferry and the US Coast Guard station.

Milwaukee was established as a port in 1835, Mr. Timm said. Port Milwaukee is municipally owned and staffed by 21 people, with a director and a seven-member Board of Harbor Commissioners. The Port property has 20 tenants, with the primary goods being dry bulk, liquid bulk, and breakbulk cargoes. The facility operates year-round and has 24/7 operational ability. Around 2.3 million tons of products are moved through the port annually, he said. The port is also the grantee of the Foreign Trade Zone (FTZ) #41 designation; it covers a large geographic area (all the M7 counties, on up to Fond du Lac County).

Mr. Timm said there are two Class I railroads that serve the port, and the roads leading to and from the port are dedicated for OSOW access. He noted some of the specific cargoes handled at Port Milwaukee. Canada is the source for most of the salt; Canada also is the source of some steel. Steel and project cargo are regular imports from Europe. There has been an uptick in project cargo and an increase in agricultural exports. Agricultural products are going to Europe, Northern Africa, and the Middle East. Mr. Timm added that landside investments have greatly helped operations at the port, including federal Port Infrastructure Development Program (PIDP) and Harbor Assistance Program (HAP) funding for emergency dockwall repairs.

The showcase project for Port Milwaukee is the recent export terminal for the DeLong Company, a major grain exporter. Mr. Timm said the project is one of the best examples of a public-private partnership, utilizing funding from multiple sources. At over \$40 million, the project represents the largest investment at the port since the 1950s. It has allowed DeLong to triple its export business; earlier this year, DeLong expanded operations with two additional silos, allowing it to export more commodities. Funding included PIDP, HAP, city funds, private funds from DeLong, and funding from DATCP. Commodities arrive by either truck or train and are then sent outbound by ocean-going vessel or barge. The barge traffic is of note, Mr. Timm said, because Milwaukee is the northernmost port for barge traffic that connects through the Illinois Waterway System to the Mississippi River, and DeLong is uses that route as an option for transportation. The only other Great Lakes ports with this access are Burns Harbor, Indiana and the Port of Chicago.

Lastly, Mr. Timm noted the port’s development of a third cruise vessel dock. This will be able to handle larger ships, like the Viking cruises. The dock is being built on dredged material that has been contained after cleanup to remediate contamination; it adds 42 acres to port operations. In 2026, Port Milwaukee expects 64 cruise ship stops, with 26,000 visitors.

The panel closed with a presentation by Eric Peace, Vice President of the Lake Carriers Association (LCA). LCA covers the vessels covered under the Jones Act: U.S.-built, U.S.-owned and crewed vessels on the Great Lakes (especially the upper four Great Lakes). Membership includes 13 companies with a total of 43 vessels. He emphasized the importance of the Jones Act (which requires vessels transporting goods between U.S. ports to be made, owned, and crewed by Americans. He noted Wisconsin’s two large shipyards – Fraser and Fincantieri – and asserted that if the Jones Act were permanently waved, there would be no domestic ship building industry.

Mr. Peace said it was critical to see the Great Lakes as a system, and to understand the economic impact of that system. Some of the numbers he presented were 147,500 jobs, \$28 billion in business revenue,

\$4.6 billion in tax revenue, and \$3.9 billion in transportation rate savings. Over the past five years, the U.S. fleet has moved 86 million tons of product, including 45.3 million tons of iron ore, 13.4 million tons of coal, 22.4 million tons of limestone, 3.2 million tons of cement, and one million tons of salt. He then showed a map of the regular routings of vessels between ports; the Upper Great Lakes have 25 ports that handle at least one million tons of cargo per year. The average “laker” (lake-moving vessel) has a carrying capacity of 70,000 tons.

In reviewing the issues for maintenance and operations on the Great Lakes, dredging was one of the priorities Mr. Peace identified. One factor he discussed was how short the window to do dredging was – once the ice was gone, then the environmental assessment was conducted, it left only three to four months to do the project. Second, he pointed to states that enact laws to exceed the federal standard on projects, which drives up costs. Third, there is the management of dredged material. The need to dredge is known, so there should be locations where the dredged material can be placed. Finally, the costs of projects have skyrocketed, meaning that inflation has reduced the number of possible projects.

One positive that Mr. Peace highlighted was the federal funding to finally complete the second Poe-sized lock at Sault Ste. Marie. What had been a \$1 billion project is now estimated at \$3.2 billion; fortunately, it’s fully funded and the project is underway, with an anticipated completion date of 2030. This marks the largest investment ever in a single project on the Great Lakes.

Mr. Peace echoed the concerns of other panelists over the lack of satisfactory ice-breaking capabilities on the Great Lakes. First, when the Seaway opens, not every waterway is clear of ice. The pressure to open early and deliver to customers whose stockpiles are depleted is high, and it stresses the system when vessels back up because they can’t get through an ice jam. During the period from mid-December until reopening in Mid- to late April, ice is present and needs to be cleared as long as shipping remains open. The U.S. fleet can move 20 percent of total tonnage during this season. Raw materials are piling up for outbound shipping by late March.

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) had more ice breaking tugs in the 1970s than at present, Mr. Peace said. In 1979, there were 14 of these vessels; two of which were thick-hulled for breaking the heaviest ice. Now, there are only nine total USCG ice breakers on the Great Lakes; the Canadian fleet has shrunk from six to two. The economic impact to the U.S., due to lack of icebreaking capability, has been \$2 billion over a five-year period, as Canadian icebreakers focus on their own system, economy, and safety. The U.S. is at a disadvantage. Fincantieri built the current heavy-duty icebreaker, the Mackinaw, but another is needed. Due to heavy service, the Mackinaw is often undergoing repairs. The vessel is often called to be multiple places at once, and that threatens safety by not being able to respond to emergencies for stuck vessels in a timely manner. Further, having additional ice breaking capacity extends the season, helping both shippers and receivers reduce the costs of stockpiling to get through the period of closure, he said.

In conclusion, Mr. Peace re-emphasized the importance of a system approach to the Great Lakes, noting the Water Resources Development Act of 2014 designated the Great Lakes as a system. Funding, however, does not go as far as it used to, and the needs include breakwalls, dredging, the second Poe lock, and additional icebreaking vessels.

When questioned on whether privatization should be considered for the icebreaking duties, Mr. Peace said the value of the USCG vessels is year-round, in terms of defense, search and rescue, and other statutory requirements. Even though there are private companies that do some icebreaking near local docks, those vessels aren’t capable of breaking through heavy ice. When asked to explain more about

the Poe Lock, Mr. Peace said it had been authorized for 35 years before funding was appropriated. There are 13 vessels on the Great Lakes at or in excess of 1,000' in length, and the Poe Lock is the only lock through which these vessels can pass. The whole system relies on it.

Mississippi / Inland Rivers Maritime Freight Panel (10:50 a.m.)

Lisa Stern, WisDOT (Moderator)

Travis Black, MARAD

Adam Binsfeld, JF Brennan Marine

Aimee Andres, Inland Rivers Ports & Terminals

Vanessa Perry, Upper Mississippi River Basin Association / Wisconsin DNR

Next, a separate panel was convened to discuss the Mississippi River and Inland Rivers, and their separate challenges. Lisa Stern again moderated, giving a brief introduction to the primary ports on the Mississippi River: La Crosse (798,000 tons in 2023) and Prairie du Chien (306,000 tons). Oil kernels and grains are the dominant commodities at La Crosse, followed by Portland cement and chemicals. Fertilizers, gravel / sand, and chemicals are the primary commodities at Prairie du Chien. Ms. Stern then gave an overview of the Harbor Assistance Program (HAP), which awarded \$7.5 million to cover seven projects at various Lake Michigan ports. 2027 grant applications are due August 1. She also mentioned that Program Manager Erika Kluetmeier was beginning a newsletter covering the HAP, including policy updates, funding opportunities, and more.

Travis Black from the U.S. Maritime Administration (MARAD) then provided a comprehensive overview of the structure of federal maritime oversight and of federal maritime programs. He noted his current role covers both Inland Waterways (as Director) and the Great Lakes (as Acting Director). The mission of MARAD is not regulatory but is instead to promote and develop the maritime industry to meet national economic and security needs. The Gateway Offices of MARAD are established to ensure a regional presence and means of communication, policy discussion, and infrastructure coordination between MARAD and the system's stakeholders, he said. USDOT has a single point of access, Navigator, that helps communities to learn if their envisioned project is eligible for funding, and if so, how to apply for grants and then deliver and manage those infrastructure projects and services.

There are several programs through which ports are eligible to receive funding, Mr. Black said. First, Local and Regional Project Assistance Program Grants have been offered under National Infrastructure Investments (AKA BUILD). The most recent funding opportunity was made available from December 2025 through February 2026; \$1.5 billion in funding was made available for FFY 2026, with a maximum award of \$25 million. Although BUILD covers all modes, ports typically receive 8 to 12 percent of grants. Mr. Black also noted the development of the U.S. Marine Highway Program, which seeks to bring better awareness of waterway transportation options for surface freight movement. There are currently 35 designated routes, he said, reaching 41 states. Wisconsin has two routes: M-35 (the Upper Mississippi River) and M-90 (the Great Lakes / St. Lawrence Seaway System). The Marine Highway Program has its own dedicated grant program for projects that offer alternatives to landside transportation.

One of the newer MARAD programs is a discretionary grant program, the Port Infrastructure Development Program (PIDP). Mr. Black said PIDP has awarded \$2.1 billion since its inception in 2019, with \$2.25 billion in total funding made available through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act over a five-year period (2022-26). The window for project applications is open through June 1, 2026. There is no minimum project size; partnership applications (public / private) are eligible. The PIDP covers projects for improving the efficiency of freight traffic that goes through ports, including dockside

transportation. Mr. Black said smaller projects have not been overlooked; one-fourth of funds have gone to projects with a federal share of less than \$11 million and less than 8 million tons of cargo. He also offered hints on how to write a successful grant application, using a compelling story and showing a clear positive impact from the funded project.

Mr. Black also discussed another new program targeted at boosting ship building, a sector with a GDP of \$37 billion and 400,000 jobs. The Small Shipyard Grant Program provides \$35 million in grants to revitalize domestic shipyards; grant applications are due May 11. He also emphasized new efforts to recruit, train, and retain the maritime workforce, and the role of Gateway directors in engaging with the stakeholders in their regions.

The next panelist, Adam Binsfeld, provided more emphasis on approaching the waterways as a system, including the infrastructure needs for that system. His company, Brennan, is based in La Crosse and employs 700 for numerous services in and along the nation's waterways. The company has a large fleet of specialized equipment to operate above and below waterlines. He displayed a map of locations where Brennan had projects in 2025; there were dozens of locations from coast to coast. A large cluster of these were in Wisconsin, Northern Illinois, and Eastern Minnesota – aligning with the Upper Mississippi and Illinois River systems.

The Inland Waterways System comprises 12,000 miles of connecting navigable waterway, Mr. Binsfeld said. There are 219 locks on the system, allowing navigation by 5,000 tugboats and towboats moving 23,000 barges with an annual average of 665 million tons of commodities. He noted the commodities moved by barge are similar to those moved by vessels on the Great Lakes, including grains, steel, chemicals, cement, petroleum, coal, aggregates, and project cargoes. He noted that each barge has the capacity to handle 270 acres of harvested grain. He noted the freight equivalent of a 15-barge tow equals two trains (each more than 100 cars) or more than 1,000 semi-trucks and tractor-trailers. Each barge can carry 1,500 tons of cargo on the Upper Mississippi, or 2,000 tons on the lower Mississippi (where drafts and channels are deeper).

Next, Mr. Binsfeld displayed maps of the inland waterways, showing the inter-connections through much of the eastern and central part of the U.S., including the Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee Rivers. The Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers connect to several other navigable river systems in the southeastern U.S., with both allowing access to the Gulf Coast and multiple ports along those shores. There are a tremendous number of destination options available via water, he said. He believes project cargoes have the greatest opportunity for modal diversion to water transportation, and manufacturers should be considering possible routings.

Brennan also provides harbor services at the Port of La Crosse, Mr. Binsfeld said. The port has six docks that handle up to one million tons of cargo per year. Both BNSF and CPKC have rail connections, and I-90 is a direct highway connection. Companies served include Cargill, Lafarge Holcim Cement, the Hanke Terminal, F.J. Robers, Midwest Industrial Asphalt, Hydrite Chemicals, and Consolidated Fuel. He noted that occasionally he'll see some of the project cargoes loaded at La Crosse showing up elsewhere. Some examples include heavy-duty aluminum ramps, loaded at La Crosse in the summer of 2015 to be sent to Austell Marine in Mobile, Alabama. In April of 2023, a photo showed one of those ramps being used by the U.S. Navy to help evacuate Americans from Sudan.

In assessing the system's status and needs, Mr. Binsfeld noted it as a high value but aging system. Between \$70 billion and \$80 billion of cargo is moved each year. Yet 80 percent of the locks are more

than 50 years old. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) has limited funding and project delivery constraints, including the Anti-Deficiency Act which prohibits spending beyond appropriated funds. He said the nation needs to “get good at funding and building big things.” He called for the federal government to shift to a system-wide, programmatic approach to funding – treating the waterways as one portfolio and having a centralized program management office within USACE to improve consistency and execution. He also called for reintroducing continuing contracts and alternative delivery methods, stating it will reduce project costs and improve schedule performance. He noted the project backlog under the current model is decades long; Lock 25 (near Winfield, MO) took a decade to get designed, approved, and funded. It will add a 1200’ lock allowing for larger barge tows. The next project will be LaGrange (Grafton, IL, on the Illinois River) around 2032, then Lock 24 (Clarksville, MO).

Specific to Wisconsin, Mr. Binsfeld said that continuing to fund the Harbor Assistance Program was essential; he said the amounts should be increased to account for inflation. One other request he recommended was a change for managing the workforce: the state should recognize maritime sector employees as exempt from job search requirements under unemployment benefits. The work should be categorized as seasonal or recall-based, he said. That way, the realities of the industry and its employees could align, and they could maintain benefits without dealing with administrative burdens. Further, the state should invest in workforce training and development incentives as some other states have done. Brennan’s initial training lasts one to two months before an employee is placed in the field; additional training is ongoing. In Wisconsin, Mr. Binsfeld said ports and inland waterways supported 147,000 jobs in 2021, adding \$15.8 billion in gross state product and \$1.2 billion in state and local tax revenue.

The next presentation came from Aimee Andres, Executive Director of Inland Rivers Ports & Terminals. Her organization represents and includes members from both public and private terminals. Her presentation was focused on recognizing the needs of the shippers as freight policies are developed and implemented and ensuring that all voices are at the table and considered. Her presentation displayed a graphic to illustrate that operations and policies are part of a system of concentric rings, with freight and shippers at the middle, freight infrastructure and port operations at the next layer, the freight system operators, facilitators, and maintenance firms in the next ring, and federal, regional, and state agencies at the outer ring – shaping the activities within the other rings. She specifically identified the State Freight Plan as a crucial piece of connecting accurate data and investment needs with policymakers.

One key graphic presented by Ms. Andres identified the specific volumes and percentages of cargoes on the Upper Mississippi. In 2023, 46 percent of the cargoes (21.0 million tons) were grains, followed by petroleum products (12 percent, 5.5 million tons) and fertilizers (10 percent, 4.6 million tons). If diverted to truck, just those three categories would add 1.24 million semi-truck moves to the highways, she said. The cost of moving freight by truck is \$15 to \$40 per ton, versus \$5 to \$15 per ton on water.

Next, Ms. Andres referenced the National Freight Strategic Plan (NFSP) and the National Multimodal Freight Network (NMFN). She said those are both integral components of any state freight plan. In the NMFN, she said there are 205 marine ports and airports. She notes the maritime ports are listed as being “major” because they are either intermodal or public terminals. However, she said there are 212 public ports with volumes under 1.5 million tons that are not listed, along with thousands of private terminals. She asserted that for the Marine Highways to be adequately identified, all public ports and private terminals should be included in the inventories.

Ports and terminals can feature complex operations with many entities and roles, Ms. Andres said. State highways provide access to the ports and support local governments on last-mile links. Class I and short

line railroads have the connections outside of the terminals to move bulk commodities. Sometimes public ports have docks with rail access. Small private terminals handle multiple roles within their boundaries. Then, Ms. Andres offered two examples of ports in other states that merited inclusion in planning efforts. One is a private terminal that handles 10 to 15 million tons of cargo per year. It sits on 825 acres, has a deep draft for vessels with nine berths, and accounts for around 2,000 jobs. It should be mapped, she said. Another facility is a smaller public port, which moves just under 1.5 million tons of cargo per year. It covers 438 acres, has a three-mile harbor, and accounts for around 1,700 direct and indirect jobs. Trucks bring grain to this terminal from a 40-mile radius. It, too, merits inclusion.

Wisconsin has examples of these facilities that should be identified and mapped separately, Ms. Andres said. She specified the DeLong facility at Port Milwaukee, which has multimodal transportation and should be part of any long-term strategic plan as a stand-alone facility.

Finally, Vanessa Perry, the Mississippi River Unit Manager for the Wisconsin DNR, spoke on behalf of the Upper Mississippi River Basin Association (UMRBA) and their support of navigation improvements while also supporting improvements to the natural environment and recreational uses. UMRBA is an interstate organization established through the governors' offices of five states (Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri). Its efforts are centered around dialog, information sharing, coordination, and cooperative actions for planning and managing initiatives for the region. She said the governors recognized that there are many layers of administration over the resource, and those require partnerships and coordination. Scientists help inform decision-makers on how best to develop a structure for management.

The U.S. Congress recognized the Upper Mississippi River as a resource with a dual significance, Ms. Perry said. It is designated as both a Nationally Significant Ecosystem and a Nationally Significant Navigation System.

UMRBA states four navigational priorities for the waterway, Ms. Perry said. They are: channel reliability, lock modernization, port infrastructure, and river resilience. She noted a time series map of Pool 8 showing vegetative recovery since the late 1990s that still maintained an open navigation channel, demonstrating that a better ecosystem can co-exist with maritime operations. UMRBA supports continued reliable, safe, and efficient navigation by supporting operations and maintenance funding for the USACE, beneficial reuse policy and planning for dredged materials, and resilience planning for both high water and low water occurrences.

As stated by others, UMRBA advocates for lock modernization, including the \$350 million appropriation request for FFY 2027 for work on Lock and Dam #25 and related ecosystem projects. She also noted the Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program (NESP), a comprehensive long-term strategy which includes plans to add 1200' chambers at Locks 20-25 on the Mississippi and at LaGrange and Peoria on the Illinois Waterway. The NESP also includes several measures to improve fish and aquatic wildlife habitats and help restore adjacent wetlands and other natural areas. Ms. Perry also noted UMRBA's role in helping facilitate the M-35 designation for the Upper Mississippi, which includes supporting the multi-state cooperation for planning and implementing projects.

One important asset that UMRBA has developed for maritime freight is the Navigation Assets Inventory, Ms. Perry said. For the entire navigable sections of the Upper Mississippi River and Illinois River, UMRBA has prepared a geolocated inventory that includes terminal operators (with contacts, commodities, transportation access information, storage capabilities, and more), river data (height, flood status), and

more. She noted UMRBA's role in resilience planning to reduce the loss of forested flood plains. The objectives in this effort reflect both navigational stability and environmental improvement. She noted that ecological changes impact the people in the river basin, as climate and equity are intertwined. Finally, she highlighted UMRBA's open participation forums for stakeholders and interested parties to discuss planning priorities for the corridor.

Combined Maritime Freight Panel – SWOT Tabletop Discussions (10:55 a.m.)

This information has been collected in a separate document.

Voices of Wisconsin's Freight-Related Industries (1:25 p.m.)

Matthew Hovar, Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration

After the FAC reconvened following lunch, Matthew Hovar opened the Voices of Industry (VOI) segment with discussion of current statistics on commercial motor vehicle fatalities. The trends are in a positive direction for Wisconsin, as the past few years have seen a reduction in both the total number of commercial motor vehicle (CMV) crashes and the number of fatal CMV crashes in the state. Wisconsin's CMV crash rates and fatal CMV crash rates have also fallen in recent years. However, three of the states with the highest CMV fatality numbers are in the Midwest – Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. The ten-state region has 448,000 motor carriers (21 percent of all companies nationally) with 2.3 million drivers and 2.2 million CMVs. As a region, fatal crashes fell seven percent from 2023 to 2024; almost half of those crashes were the fault of the other vehicle. Mr. Hovar also noted the region conducted almost 500,000 inspections in 2024. He praised the new safety features being introduced to CMVs, such as collision avoidance systems.

Steve Griffith, National Electrical Manufacturers Association

Mr. Griffith noted his organization represents 300 electrical equipment manufacturers. The theme of his VOI presentation was the "Make It American" initiative of NEMA. Under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Buy America provisions require domestic content with 55 percent compliance on manufactured products. However supply chains are diverse, and some products have no domestic supplier or manufacturer, posing challenges for NEMA members.

As a result, he noted the association's policy statements asking for a "level playing field" that has clarity on how to achieve domestic content requirements. Companies now need suppliers to certify the degree of domestic content and help demonstrate compliance. NEMA is helping members to navigate requirements by developing a third-party certification process of companies that are compliant with Buy America provisions, accompanied by an online registry. He noted it's better to meet compliance than to get a waiver.

Peter Andrews, Schreiber Foods

Mr. Andrews provided a brief overview of his company's major position in providing dairy products to food service and private label customers, especially process cheese slices, cream cheese, and yogurt. The company has 40 worldwide locations, and exports to 95 countries. In addition to the Green Bay headquarters and operations, Schreiber has operations in three other Wisconsin cities. He said the challenges that were greatest for his business are tied into fuel and energy costs, and on navigating the changing export rules.

Melissa Hunt, Wisconsin Economic Development Association (WEDA)

Ms. Hunt introduced herself as the WEDA President, noting her association has a history of helping local governments with economic development going back to 1977. She said that the challenges of economic development encompass a broad range of issues, including day care, housing, transportation, and energy. Data centers have emerged as a current priority concern.

She noted that WEDA has several target areas for engagement. These include policy development at the state level; she noted WEDA has helped guide five bills to pass this year. Other areas include professional support for local economic development and building networking and connection opportunities. Overall, the intent is to be the voice of local economic development – and to keep listening to those local concerns.

Sandi Siegel, M.E. Dey & Co.

As president and director of a freight forwarding firm, Ms. Siegel stated that the changing tariffs for imports has created volatility and uncertainty; this has also affected exports as other countries retaliate. She noted that following the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that struck down the tariffs imposed in April 2025, Customs has opened a web portal to file for a refund of fees collected. The total amount eligible for refund is estimated at \$166 billion. Meanwhile, after the ruling the administration immediately filed to use Section 122 to collect duties under that code; this puts a lot of trade at stake with the nation's top trading partners.

She noted that as the tariffs have fluctuated, there hasn't been a big change in volumes, just a change in cycles. Last year there was a boom in trade in the first quarter as importers stocked up in anticipation of tariffs. Then, they held back on imports as they worked through inventories. There wasn't the typical peak season of traffic in late summer (ahead of the holiday season); in fact, some ocean rates actually declined for the first time ever at that time of the year. Things are calmer now; carrier rates have remained fairly flat. However, the issues at the Strait of Hormuz have led to a new round of surcharges, with exports most disrupted. Air freight has seen rates rise quickly due to tight capacity. She hopes for a calmer end to 2026.

Ana Garic, Madison International Trade Association (MITA)

Ms. Garic provided a brief introduction to MITA. The association has been active since 1979, and places emphasis on efforts to connect and inform members to empower them, thereby improving their opportunities for successful international trade. MITA holds up to ten events every year, focusing on educational programs that explain supply chains, customs rules, international finance, and more. The Spring 2026 events include a program on cheese exporting, and a larger "World Trade Day" event with 30 speakers and break-out sessions tailored to the needs of current and prospective exporters.

Air Cargo Panel (1:45 p.m.)

Karla Knorr, WisDOT (Moderator)

Jim Best, Dbest Services

Jack Rabenn, Crow Holdings

Brian Dranzik, Milwaukee General Mitchell International

For the final panel session of the day, Bureau of Aeronautics (BOA) Director Karla Knorr moderated a panel of three people with direct involvement in a new air cargo facility at Milwaukee Mitchell – a facility that will be the largest in Wisconsin.

First, Ms. Knorr offered an overview of the BOA's role in Wisconsin's air cargo market. At present, BOA's efforts have focused on assisting with infrastructure at airports, including administering funds. She noted WisDOT helped with \$1.25 million to fund taxiways for the Milwaukee air cargo facility. She also noted that BOA conducts regular assessments of infrastructure needs and economic impacts for air facilities around the state, including demand forecasts. These studies influence infrastructure projects for air cargo facilities. BOA also provides technical assistance and standards guidance, stakeholder coordination, and supports emerging aviation technology, such as Advanced Air Mobility (AAM).

Ms. Knorr said that the BOA will be working on two large projects this year. The first will be an update of the State Aviation System Plan. Its last update was in 2015; this version will include a study of air cargo and an economic impact study. Ms. Knorr also said the bureau will be doing a Wisconsin-focused study on AAM. These are smaller craft designed to operate in narrow corridors and altitudes under 5,000 feet using advanced technologies established under a national policy implemented in late 2025. These are electrically powered, with features including vertical take-off and landing. There are eight pilot projects around the U.S. to test these craft, with 20 states studying these vehicles. Wisconsin will begin its own study this summer. Purposes can include urban air taxis, cargo networks, and emergency medical responses.

Next, the team who helped develop the Milwaukee Air Cargo panel introduced themselves. Jim Best has 48 years of experience in air freight; he referred to himself as the "ambassador" for the project. He said this facility will have a dramatic impact and be a game-changer for the state and the businesses in the state that use air freight. Brian Dranzik is the Airport Director, with more than 20 years of experience. He said the origin of this project began several years ago when the 440th Airlift Wing of the U.S. Air Force Reserve closed operations at Mitchell. Milwaukee County took over the property and studied the best use. The area had a large ramp area that was an advantage for cargo operations. He noted that when he was first hired, one of his earliest projects was developing more air cargo; it now comes back at the other end of his career. Mr. Dranzik said that the ground-side complications at O'Hare have made Chicago a bottleneck, and this facility offers the chance to alleviate pressure on air cargo in the region.

The majority of the presentation was made by Jack Rabenn of Crow Holdings, the developer. He noted the old 440th footprint contained 36 buildings when the project was first considered five years ago. The Covid shocks allowed for discussion of air freight options to be developed, and the discussion turned to addressing capacity and congestion issues. He said there were a lot of layers of bureaucracy to navigate – federal, state, and local – but the opportunity was there. Most air freight for the state now goes through O'Hare or Rockford; there are multiple international companies in southeastern Wisconsin, from Rockwell to Eli Lilly, that use air freight and that will find Milwaukee to be an advantage.

Mr. Rabenn then offered an introduction to how the air cargo sector operates and is structured. He noted it is similar to coastal seaports, in that manufacturers, freight forwarders, the carriers (companies providing the actual airplane service), and air cargo handlers (the ground-based operators who will lease space at the facility) all play roles in moving the product. A fifth operational player is that of integrators; examples include UPS, Amazon, DHL, and FedEx. They combine multiple aspects of the other players, along with ground services. They also consolidate shipments from multiple customers on their flights. Mr. Rabenn also noted the differentiation between air cargo on aircraft dedicated to cargo service (main / upper deck) and those in the cargo hold of passenger aircraft (belly cargo). There are several specialized global carriers that operate main deck air freight; these craft are able to take larger, heavier shipments. Air cargo hubs are built around the operation of main deck services and capacity.

Another distinction Mr. Rabenn noted was that between consolidated cargo and dedicated cargo. A consolidator combines freight from multiple customers that is managed through freight forwarders, mostly on scheduled operations. These operations are lower cost, and are best for smaller, routine shipments that are less time-critical. Dedicated cargo is better suited for larger equipment and components being moved for a single customer. The air service can be either scheduled or chartered, but it typically comes at a higher cost. Therefore, high value and perishable items are typical cargoes.

Milwaukee's business model envisions starting with charter flights, then moving to a hybrid with scheduled flights starting as traffic increases. Some of the shipping lanes Mr. Rabenn sees as most promising are flights to and from Shanghai and Shenzhen in China, or Frankfurt and Amsterdam in Europe. He noted the U.S. Midwest has almost 100 million people within a day's drive, and the airport has good access to I-94, just 1.5 miles west of the facility. There is ample warehouse and manufacturing space in the region, especially between Milwaukee and Chicago. He once again noted the region's manufacturing base and growing pharmaceutical sector, with many businesses that are already air cargo customers.

Relative to the site plan itself, Mr. Rabenn noted several advantages that Milwaukee will have. With the enlarged and thicker taxiways, the cargo terminal will be able to accommodate the heaviest air cargo planes; space exists for five Category 5 aircraft to be positioned at once. The building itself is elongated, with 333,000 square feet of space. As noted, WisDOT funded the rebuilding of taxiways to handle heavier aircraft. There will also be a fuel farm with a capacity of 400,000 gallons, and 45 docks plus another 63 parking spots for trailers. Mr. Rabenn also noted the economic impact of the facility, from employment to marketable advantages such as improved global access and more reliable supply chains. He said some of the business sectors and cargoes that could be early users would include data center racks, medical equipment, and pharmaceuticals.

The question-and-answer session began with a question on whether the facility would be in a Foreign Trade Zone (FTZ). The response was yes; the airport is working with Port Milwaukee, which holds FTZ 41 for southeastern Wisconsin, to activate that status for the air cargo terminal. The process would include identifying the user (which would be the ground handler) and the goods being moved through the facility. The process will take around two months to activate. Jim Best added that many existing companies using air cargo in Chicago would be able to use the FTZ; at present, 90 percent of the region's air cargo goes to Chicago. He envisions that a schedule of two to three flights per week to Asia and to Europe will develop; once landed, the cargo would be available for release in eight hours, versus two to eight days in Chicago. Mr. Best also noted the rapid growth of data centers in southeastern Wisconsin as one of the factors driving demand for air cargo, and that Milwaukee was well positioned with airport capacity and infrastructure. The last needed piece is the building to handle air cargo. He noted this project is mostly third-party funded under a public-private partnership; \$10 million of the \$80 million project cost is from public sources (including the WisDOT Airport Improvement Program). Engaging private development firms was crucial to this project.

Mr. Rabenn offered thoughts on how government can help the air freight sector. The overarching message was that state and local governments need alignment on goals and incentives. He also noted that governments needed better awareness of supply chains, working with customers, logistics teams, and the freight forwarders who decide where freight goes. A FAC member asked about the local road system and if improvements were needed. The panelists replied that the adjacent roads – College Avenue (County Hwy ZZ) and Howell Avenue (STH 38) were both rebuilt in the recent past and designed for freight traffic. College Avenue was expanded in 2010 to accommodate traffic for a new USPS facility

just southeast of the airport. The interchange with I-94 (also reconstructed) allows easy access from the airport to the state line. Another panelist noted that the benefits of having the Milwaukee air cargo facility include use of Wisconsin-based drivers for last-mile deliveries. Instead of the cargo owner needing to pay extra fees for travel, tolls, and delays at O'Hare (including storage and other accessorial charges), the companies will now save those costs and have greater predictability.

Mr. Rabenn added other potential incentives that governments could use. One would be credits or grants for manufacturers who keep supply chains within Wisconsin. He also said ground handlers could be incentivized by grants for equipment. He added that carriers could be incentivized by tax credits or abatements for jet fuel taxes. Further, he noted that carriers could benefit from credits or abatement from landing fees, which are typically assessed per thousand pounds of cargo. Milwaukee's fee is currently \$6.50 per thousand pounds; at O'Hare, that fee is almost double - \$12.85. At Rockford, the fee is only \$2.00 per thousand pounds. But Rockford lacks the freight forwarders, warehouse space, and trucking firms that are at O'Hare. Planes regularly land at Rockford to avoid the landing fees, then have the goods trucked back to O'Hare to be warehoused. He also noted that O'Hare's taxiing time (the time from being cleared to leave the gate until being given a runway for departure) is 45 to 60 minutes, yet another disincentive to using that airport.

A question was raised about the integrator operations based at Rockford. The panelists replied that Amazon and UPS have hub operations there, and service southern Wisconsin from there. Fed Ex and UPS have parcel operations for next-day service. The market was previously operated by Burlington Express, but that company was taken over in a merger. There needs to be a redevelopment of these regional integrator operations.

The panelists restated that there is already air cargo moving from Wisconsin to Chicago; having Milwaukee will be a valuable alternative. The goal will be to enlighten those who use air cargo. Jack Rabenn offered a caveat by looking at traffic from a different airport, Rickenbacker in Columbus, Ohio. Following a major modernization and expansion project, the airport saw the number of international flights more than double between 2016 and 2022. However, a changed market for textiles and a move by Amazon to a different airport led to a sharp decline in traffic. By comparison, however, Milwaukee has an advantage in a customer base that ships heavy equipment cargoes on a regular basis.

Air Cargo Panel – SWOT Tabletop Discussions (2:35 p.m.)

This information has been collected in a separate document.

Closing Remarks (3:40 p.m.)

David Hubbard, Assistant Deputy Secretary, WisDOT

After introducing himself as WisDOT's new Assistant Deputy Secretary, Mr. Hubbard thanked the FAC members for their ongoing engagement with WisDOT, and for bringing attention to the freight needs of external stakeholders. He expressed appreciation for their input throughout the day and closed by saying WisDOT looked forward to the fall 2026 meeting in October.