



Chapter 1: Introduction

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Wisconsin has a diverse multimodal transportation system that supports the state's quality of life and economic growth. Rail is a critical component to the state's entire transportation network. Substantial changes have taken place with regard to rail and continue to impact how the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) and other rail stakeholders respond. With projected increases in the state's population and steady growth in traffic congestion – particularly for truck traffic freight, passenger and commuter rail will become even more vital to the state's transportation system.

Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030, the state's 20 year rail plan, identifies future rail network issues and plan recommendations. It provides the framework within which the state and related stakeholders may maintain, improve and plan for the state's rail network. WisDOT will update the plan in the next five years to reflect changes and to meet federal requirements.

The plan takes a closer look at Wisconsin's rail system by focusing on the role freight, intercity passenger and commuter rail have in the state's multimodal transportation system. The rail plan discusses how:

- A strong rail system is important for maintaining and improving the state's economic vitality
- Rail supports livable communities
- Connections between rail and other transportation modes help improve the efficiency of the state's entire transportation system

The rail plan also identifies priorities and strategies to establish a basis for future rail investments.

Because this is a modal plan, it builds on the policies and actions identified in *Connections 2030*, the state's long-range multimodal transportation plan. *Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030* supports the state's multimodal vision for transportation:

“An integrated multimodal transportation system that maximizes the safe and efficient movement of people and products throughout the state, enhancing economic productivity and the quality of Wisconsin's communities while minimizing impacts to the natural environment.”

Connections 2030 established the foundation for the future of the state's transportation system. The plan emphasized the importance of:

- Safety and security
- Preserving the existing and future transportation system
- Optimizing investment in the transportation system for continued safety, enhanced mobility and efficiency
- Responding to local, regional, national and intermodal economic trends to maintain the state's economic competitiveness

- Considering environmental issues to maintain Wisconsin's quality of life
- Providing users with transportation choices

To further reflect these emphasis areas, the policies identified in *Connections 2030* were organized around seven themes:

- Preserve and maintain Wisconsin's transportation system
- Promote transportation safety
- Foster Wisconsin's economic growth
- Provide mobility and transportation choice
- Promote transportation efficiencies
- Preserve Wisconsin's quality of life
- Promote transportation security

Under each theme, WisDOT identified a series of policy statements. These policy statements are WisDOT's goals to achieve the *Connections 2030* vision for transportation. *Connections 2030* identified several policies directly related to rail. These policies were:

- Partner with stakeholders to ensure that freight movements are safe and reliable and provide positive environmental and community impacts
- Ensure that freight rail remains a viable transportation mode for Wisconsin shippers
- Support development of fixed-guideway transit services
- Increase intercity travel options by improving intercity passenger rail service
- Facilitate intermodal passenger connections

Other policies included rail-related activities or support of rail-related activities. Examples of these policies include:

- Provide grant and loan assistance to Wisconsin businesses and communities
- Maintain and improve waterways critical to Wisconsin's transportation system
- Improve intercity bus service and connections
- Emphasize air quality improvement
- Enhance the security of the transportation system by reducing vulnerability

Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030 reaffirms the policies and actions identified in *Connections 2030*.

Compliance with the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 and 49 U.S.C Section 22102 requirements

Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030 is intended to bring the state of Wisconsin in compliance with the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA) (Public Law No. 110- 432). The PRIIA legislation requires that states develop a long-range plan for freight, intercity passenger, and commuter rail, and update the plan at least every five years, to be eligible for federal funding. Section 303, Chapter 227

State Rail Plans outlines specific requirements for the development of state rail plans. *Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030* is designed to meet these requirements.

Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030 brings the State of Wisconsin in compliance with Title 49 United States Code Section 22102 requirements, making the state eligible to receive financial assistance under this chapter based on compliance with regulations the United States Secretary of Transportation prescribes under this chapter as follows:

- 1) the state has an adequate plan for rail transportation in the state and a suitable process for updating, revising, and modifying the plan
- 2) a designated state authority administers or coordinates the state rail plan and provides for a fair distribution of resources
- 3) the State authority –
 - a. is authorized to develop, promote, supervise, and support safe, adequate, and efficient rail transportation
 - b. employs or will employ sufficient qualified and trained personnel
 - c. maintains or will maintain adequate programs of investigation, research, promotion, and development with opportunity for public participation
 - d. is designated and directed to take all practicable steps (by itself or with other state authorities) to improve rail transportation safety and reduce energy use and pollution related to transportation
- 4) the state ensures that it maintains adequate procedures for financial control, accounting, and performance evaluation for the proper use of assistance provided by the United States Government

Wisconsin's Rail System

Wisconsin's rail history

Railroads have been an integral part of Wisconsin's transportation system and economy since 1847 when the state's first freight service was introduced. The first intercity passenger rail service in Wisconsin began in 1851, carrying travelers between Milwaukee and Waukesha. From the 1860s until the late 1920s, private railroad companies built an extensive passenger and freight service network throughout Wisconsin and connected the state with the rest of the country. By the late 1920s, every county in the state had at least one depot. Wisconsin's railroad network peaked around 1920 with about 7,600 miles.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, government regulation, the rapid growth of truck and barge freight movement, the construction of the interstate highway system and inland waterway system, and huge losses in passenger operations led to a number of railroad bankruptcies and service abandonments, as well as deferred maintenance and general financial deterioration of the rail industry.

In 1970, Congress passed the Federal Rail Passenger Service Act, which created the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, commonly known as Amtrak, to operate the nation's intercity passenger rail services. Its purpose was to relieve the freight railroads from the huge losses incurred in passenger service that the railroads were required to provide.

In 1980, the Staggers Railroad Act provided widespread deregulation of the railroad industry. Prior to 1980, government regulation limited railroads' ability to adjust their rates, making it difficult for railroads to compete with other modes, particularly the trucking industry. The act allowed railroads to adjust their rates based on market demand. The act also allowed for easier abandonment of lines and led to significant changes among carriers as larger railroads "spun-off" their unproductive lines to newly created short-line and regional railroads. For more information see Chapter 5, Freight Rail.

Role of rail in Wisconsin

Today, Wisconsin's rail network includes approximately 3,600 miles of track. Of that total, just over 530 miles are owned by the state and leased to railroad companies. Eleven freight rail companies operate in the state. In addition, Amtrak provides intercity passenger service on two routes, and Metra provides commuter rail service between Kenosha and Chicago.

Looking ahead to 2030, WisDOT foresees rail continuing to play an important role in Wisconsin's economy for several reasons:

- Rail service provides a low cost transportation alternative for high volume, lower value commodities that are essential to many of Wisconsin's manufacturing industries
- Rail freight movement between Wisconsin, Canada and Mexico is expected to continue to grow.
- Intercity passenger rail provides a travel option for those who cannot, or choose not to, drive or fly
- Both rail freight and passenger service provide an energy efficient way to move goods and people

Stakeholders/plan implementation

Unlike the state's highway and local road system, which are owned by either WisDOT or local governments, the majority of the state's rail infrastructure is privately owned and operated. As a result, decisions regarding track maintenance and operation are made by private companies based on their business needs and investment priorities. Likewise, WisDOT does not directly provide any freight, intercity passenger or commuter rail service. Instead, WisDOT's role is focused on making investment decisions that support the state's transportation network and overall growth of the economy and supporting passenger rail services. In general, WisDOT does this by providing technical assistance relative to specific issues, and offering funding assistance limited to specific rail related needs and activities.

For these reasons, actions identified in this plan require coordination and cooperation among many different stakeholders. Since the rail industry is considered intercity commerce, the federal government has a key role in its regulation, even though the level of federal government involvement is much less today than it was prior to the Staggers Act. Below is a brief summary of some of the key stakeholders and their respective roles.

- Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) – the lead federal agency concerned with the safety and performance of the nation’s freight rail, intercity passenger rail and roadway/railway crossings.
- Federal Transit Administration (FTA) – concerned with the safety and performance of commuter rail systems (a fixed-guideway transit system mode)
- Wisconsin Office of the Commissioner of Railroads (OCR) – monitors and addresses roadway/railway safety. OCR is also responsible for ensuring the proper drainage in railroad rights of way, maintaining sight clearance at crossings and regulating train crews
- Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) – in terms of freight railroads, WisDOT administers grant programs for freight railroad improvements. WisDOT also owns track that is leased to local transit commissions. In terms of passenger rail, WisDOT and the Illinois Department of Transportation provide funding for Amtrak’s *Hiawatha Service* between Milwaukee and Chicago. WisDOT has had a longstanding involvement in planning future intercity passenger rail service within the state and the Midwest region. WisDOT is working with Illinois to study increasing Chicago-Milwaukee Amtrak *Hiawatha Service* frequencies from 7 daily round-trips to 10 daily round-trips, and working with Minnesota and La Crosse County on a feasibility study of a second round-trip frequency between Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis/St. Paul on the existing Amtrak *Empire Builder* route. WisDOT has also provided funding for some commuter rail studies
- Amtrak – provides intercity passenger rail service. In Wisconsin, Amtrak operates the *Hiawatha Service* between Milwaukee and Chicago, and the *Empire Builder* service between Chicago and Seattle/Portland
- Metra – regional commuter rail system that serves the greater Chicago area. Currently, Metra provides daily service between Kenosha and downtown Chicago
- Freight railroads – own, operate and maintain the majority of track in Wisconsin
- Local governments – are responsible for development decisions within their communities. With primary responsibility for land use planning, they are responsible for decisions such as rail stations and surrounding development, as well as enacting community level whistle-blowing laws