



## Chapter 7: Commuter Rail

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# Chapter 7: Commuter Rail

## Introduction

The 2001 Governor’s Blue Ribbon Task Force on Passenger Rail defined commuter rail as:

“Passenger rail service operating primarily on existing freight and/or intercity passenger railroad tracks on a separate right of way between and within metropolitan and suburban areas, connecting these areas with large business and/or urban centers, whether within or across the geographical boundaries of a state. Commuter rail usually operates during peak travel times with limited stops and in conjunction with other transit modes as part of a regional transit system. Equipment type and trip distance will vary based on the technology available and desired trip market.”

The state’s *Connections 2030* long-range multimodal transportation plan included locally-proposed fixed-guideway transit systems in Wisconsin’s largest urban areas as a way of increasing transportation options and promoting economic development. As defined in *Connections 2030*, fixed-guideway transit systems include commuter rail, as well as light rail and bus rapid transit.

While commuter rail is considered public transit and is funded and regulated by the Federal Transit Authority, the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 specifically states that state rail plans must address commuter rail.

Currently, commuter rail is a small part of

Wisconsin’s multimodal transportation system but it could become an increasingly important part of the transportation system, if proposed commuter rail systems advance. Commuter rail offers public benefits such as:

- Increased mobility and transportation choice
- Reduced air emissions and energy consumption from automobiles
- Increased economic activity around commuter rail stations within the corridor
- Improved connectivity to employment, recreation, education and other opportunities

These benefits help explain why several of the state’s communities have studied commuter rail service.

### Fixed-guideway transit

- Operates on permanent, separate right of way for the exclusive use of transit vehicles, existing freight railroad tracks, or on-street rail
- Can be rail or bus rapid transit
- Attracts increases in transit ridership and improves transit service by reducing travel times and increasing frequencies
- Examples include commuter rail (diesel or electric trains), light rail (electric vehicles, including streetcars), and bus rapid transit (buses on exclusive right of way)

This chapter reviews:

- Existing commuter rail service in Wisconsin
- The Wisconsin Department of Transportation's (WisDOT's) role in commuter rail
- Recent or ongoing commuter rail studies
- Issues and recommendations related to commuter rail

## Existing Commuter Rail Service in Wisconsin

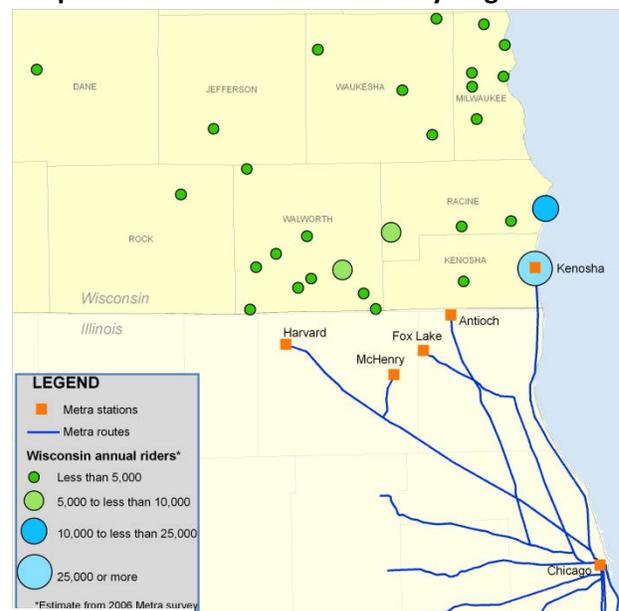
Currently, Metra is the only commuter rail provider operating in Wisconsin. Metra, officially the Northeast Illinois Regional Commuter Railroad Corporation, is a commuter rail system serving Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. The system serves over 100 communities with 239 stations on 11 lines.

Metra provides one stop in Wisconsin, with its Union Pacific North Line terminating in Kenosha. The line provides service between Kenosha and downtown Chicago, with nine weekday departures from Kenosha; five departures on Saturdays and three departures on Sundays. In addition to commuter rail, the Kenosha Metra station is served by local transit and regional commuter bus service. In 2010, average weekday ridership on the Union Pacific North Line was 36,400, while overall Metra average weekday ridership was 301,200. Annual Metra system passenger trips totaled 81,369,000.

A 2006 boarding and alighting survey showed the Kenosha station had over 400 boardings on weekdays. This was an increase of more than 25 percent from 2002. The 2006 survey showed that of those boarding:

- 61 percent drove alone to the station
- 16 percent were dropped off
- 11 percent carpooled
- 6 percent walked

**Map 7-1: Wisconsin Metra users by origin**



Source: Metra

The survey also revealed that two percent or fewer of those boarding Metra trains used transit, taxi, bike or other modes to access the station.

In addition to the Kenosha station, four other Metra commuter rail stations are located near the Wisconsin border:

- Antioch, Illinois – North Central service line
- Fox Lake, Illinois – Milwaukee District North line

- Harvard, Illinois – Union Pacific Northwest line
- McHenry, Illinois – Union Pacific Northwest line

As shown in Map 7-1, the 2006 Metra passenger survey revealed that many riders from southeastern Wisconsin used the Kenosha station, as well as Metra stations located in Antioch, Fox Lake, Harvard and McHenry, Illinois. The largest number of riders originated in Kenosha, followed by Racine, Pleasant Prairie and Lake Geneva.

## WisDOT’s Role in Commuter Rail

Although the state provides financial and technical support, decisions about the nature, amount and location of transit services to be provided are generally the responsibility of local governments. In the past, WisDOT has provided technical assistance in commuter rail studies. As with other transit services, decisions on whether to study the need for commuter rail have been the result of local initiatives. WisDOT is also responsible for the federally-required safety review of fixed-guideway systems. *Connections 2030* recommended WisDOT continue to participate in commuter rail studies and provide support and technical expertise to advance and implement projects. Throughout the planning period, local governments will continue to be responsible for identifying potential commuter rail routes, completing any necessary studies and identifying potential funding sources.

The Federal Transit Administration’s New Starts discretionary grant program is the primary financial resource for major transit projects. Awarded funds may be used for new and existing fixed-guideway systems, including commuter rail, light and heavy rail, bus transit, streetcars and ferries.

### ***Recent commuter rail studies***

As Wisconsin communities have considered including commuter rail in their transportation systems, several commuter rail studies have been completed. This section provides a brief review of these studies.

#### **Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee (KRM) commuter rail**

The Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission completed a study in 1998 that concluded establishing commuter rail service between Kenosha and Milwaukee was technically and financially feasible based on forecast ridership, fares, capital and operating costs, and existing public subsidy programs. In 2005, the state legislature created a temporary regional transit authority in Kenosha, Milwaukee and Racine counties to provide project sponsorship and funding. The commission completed an alternatives analysis and draft environmental impact statement for the KRM commuter rail line. WisDOT provided financial assistance with these studies and served on the study committees.

Regional transit authorities are special purpose units of government that can administer and fund transit systems. Regional transit authorities are common throughout the United States.

As shown in Map 7-2, the recommended alternative provides commuter rail service between Milwaukee and Kenosha. Fourteen daily weekday round-trips

would serve nine stations along the route. The service would connect with Metra's Union Pacific North line in Kenosha, which provides connections to 25 communities in northern Illinois, terminating at the Chicago Union Station. The KRM service would share roughly 0.5 miles of rail line south of the Milwaukee Intermodal Station and into the station with existing and new intercity passenger rail service.

Based on the study's findings and continued community support, the 2009-2011 state budget created the Southeast Regional Transit Authority. The Southeast Regional Transit Authority had the authority to create, construct and manage the KRM commuter rail line. The authority also had the power to levy a vehicle rental fee of up to \$18 per transaction in Kenosha, Milwaukee and Racine counties, as well as issue bonds. Subsequent legislation repealed the authority and it is no longer in existence. The KRM commuter rail project is not advancing as of the time of this writing.

### **Other Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission studies**

The Southeast Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission completed two other commuter rail feasibility studies in 2002; one for the Walworth-Fox Lake, Illinois corridor and one for the Burlington-Antioch, Illinois corridor (Map 7-2). Based on anticipated ridership and cost-effectiveness of the proposed services, both studies recommended that additional planning work not be pursued at the time. For the Walworth-Fox Lake corridor, the study recommended that further planning and engineering work be deferred until two conditions are met:

- Metra is actively planning to extend service from Fox Lake to Richmond
- The roles of the State of Wisconsin and local governments in regards to implementing and sharing the costs of commuter rail are clearly defined

The Burlington-Antioch study recommended no further work be done. However, the study acknowledged that other factors may warrant revisiting the issue in the future. These factors include:

- Increasing traffic congestion
- Increasing fuel costs
- Changes in development and travel patterns, particularly an increase in the number of individuals living in western Kenosha and Racine counties and working in the Chicago central business district

WisDOT provided financial assistance for both of these studies and participated on the study committees.

The Southeast Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission *Year 2035 Regional Transportation Plan* also identified three additional commuter rail lines to be considered in corridor studies:

- Oconomowoc to Milwaukee
- West Bend to Milwaukee
- Saukville to Milwaukee

**Map 7-2: Commuter rail studies in southeastern Wisconsin**



The *Year 2035 Regional Transportation Plan* recommended that initial rapid transit service be provided along these corridors using buses. The plan envisions eventually transitioning the bus service to commuter rail service.

### Transport 2020

In 1997, *Vision 2020*, a regional master plan for Dane County, recognized the importance of improved transit service to accommodate forecasted regional growth and maintain mobility for county residents, workers and students. Based on that plan, the Transport 2020 study was initiated to study transportation alternatives for the greater Madison/Dane County area. Dane County, the City of Madison and WisDOT jointly funded the study. WisDOT also participated on the study committee. As part of Transport 2020 an alternatives analysis was completed in 2002. A commuter rail service between Middleton and Sun Prairie, through downtown Madison, was one of the study's recommendations (Map 7-3) and part of the "locally preferred alternative." The proposed Transport 2020 commuter rail service would share tracks and/or right of way with freight trains and any future intercity passenger rail trains.

**Map 7-3: Transport 2020 commuter rail alternative**



In 2009 and 2010, Transport 2020 project sponsors were completing a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS), and submitting an application for federal funding under the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) New Starts program. The project application was withdrawn and the project is not advancing as of the time of this writing.

If the project advances in the future, the next steps would include submitting the draft environmental impact statement, the New Starts application, and the preliminary engineering, final design and construction plans. Transport 2020 was also considering a route from downtown Madison to the Dane County Regional Airport. In order to be awarded FTA New Starts funding, to complete final design and construct the commuter rail line, a local financial commitment for a share of the capital costs and operating costs for the service is required.

### South Central Wisconsin Commuter Transportation Study

Completed in 2008, the South Central Wisconsin Commuter Transportation Study evaluated the need for, and feasibility of, new or enhanced regional transit service. The study focused on connecting Rock County with Dane County and Northern Illinois. The study committee recommended several tasks, including:

- Promoting vanpools to area residents

- Coordinating with WisDOT regarding the statewide RIDESHARE program and the location of future park and ride facilities
- Identifying five rail corridors for preservation of rail facilities and rights of way for continued freight rail service and potential future commuter rail service:
  - Janesville – Harvard, Illinois
  - Beloit – Clinton
  - Janesville – Rockford, Illinois
  - Madison – Milton – Janesville
  - Madison – Evansville – Janesville

WisDOT provided financial assistance for the study and participated on the study committee.

### Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning recommendations

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, more than 41,000 Wisconsin residents work in Illinois. Many of these residents work in the greater Chicago area. For this reason, improvements to the Metra commuter rail system can benefit Wisconsin residents.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning identified two potential extensions of service along Metra’s Milwaukee District North line in its *2030 Regional Transportation Plan (Map 7-4)*. The Milwaukee District North line currently provides service between downtown Chicago and Fox Lake, Illinois. The region’s transportation plan proposes two possible extensions along the route:

- Extending service from Fox Lake, Illinois to Richmond, Illinois
- Extending service from Roundout, Illinois to Wadsworth, Illinois

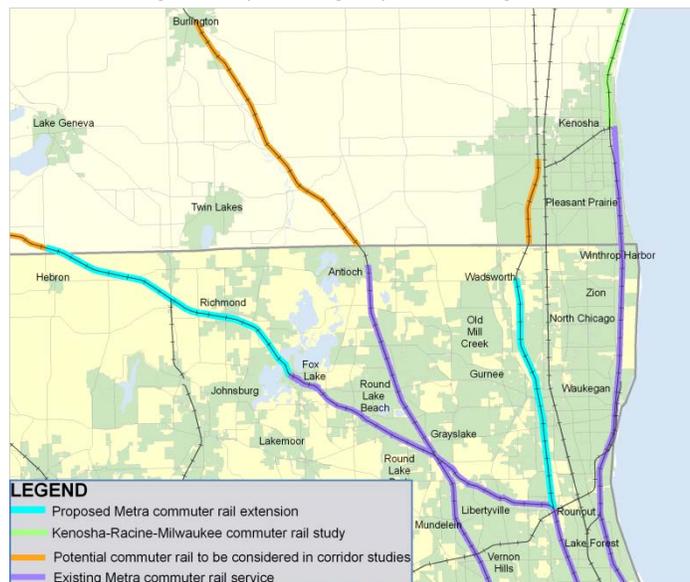
While neither extension would terminate in Wisconsin, the new stations would be located closer to the Illinois/Wisconsin border than the existing stations, improving access to Wisconsin residents.

### Metropolitan Council recommendations

Like Chicago, the proximity of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area also affects Wisconsin. Based on the 2000 U.S. Census, more than 44,000 Wisconsin residents commute to Minnesota for work. Of these workers, almost 15,000 reside in St. Croix County. For this reason, improvements in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area transportation system can benefit Wisconsin.

**Map 7-4: Potential extensions of Metra service**

Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning



The Metropolitan Council, the metropolitan planning organization for the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area, identified a potential commuter rail corridor along I-94 between St. Paul and Roberts in its *2030 Transit Master Study*. While the study projected low annualized costs, it also projected low ridership along the corridor. The study also noted cost-sharing would have to be addressed with Wisconsin.

**Map 7-5: Potential commuter rail corridor between St. Paul and Roberts**



**Source: Metropolitan Council**

### **I-94 corridor**

The 2009 *Minnesota Comprehensive Statewide Freight and Passenger Rail Plan* identified the I-94 corridor between Minneapolis-St. Paul and the Wisconsin border as a potential intercity passenger rail route. Similarly, the Metropolitan Interstate Council identified a portion of this same I-94 corridor for potential commuter rail service. These actions provided impetus for the creation of the Gateway Corridor Commission, a State of Minnesota joint powers board made up of the Minnesota local units of government located along the I-94 corridor between Minneapolis-St. Paul and the Wisconsin border. The Gateway Corridor Commission's goal was to study the viability of potential commuter rail, intercity passenger rail, light rail or more traditional transit modes to their communities. Federal and state earmarks were received to perform an environmental study regarding potential transit services along the I-94 corridor between St. Paul and Eau Claire.

With the study area of the Gateway Corridor Commission reaching into Wisconsin, Wisconsin representatives were added to the Minnesota Gateway Commission policy advisory and technical advisory committees.

The Gateway Corridor Commission completed an alternatives analysis study of the Interstate 94 corridor between St. Paul and Eau Claire to determine the best alternative mode of transit to serve the corridor.

The study included analysis of light rail, bus rapid transit and commuter rail options serving the east metro area of the Twin Cities and then along the Wisconsin I-94 Corridor to Eau Claire.

Results and recommendations from that effort pertaining to Wisconsin include the following:

- Light rail or commuter rail options beyond the I-494/I-694 corridor (approximately 12 miles west of the Wisconsin border) did not advance.
- Express Bus was identified as the most viable solution to current and near-future transit needs within the I-94 corridor in Wisconsin between Hudson and Eau Claire, as well as within Minnesota between Hudson and I-494/I-694 to the west.
- No infrastructure additions or alterations within Wisconsin are identified in the Gateway Commission report. However, the report notes that when the existing St. Croix River Crossing structures on I-94 at Hudson need to be reconstructed, the inclusion of dedicated lanes for transit accommodations will be a consideration.

## Issues

Existing and proposed commuter rail service faces many challenges. This section reviews four of these challenges:

- Coordination between different rail providers
- Intermodal connections
- Funding
- Governance

### ***Coordination between different rail providers***

Existing and planned commuter rail services in Wisconsin do not and most likely will not operate on track dedicated solely to commuter rail operations. Instead, commuter rail services share, or will share, track with freight and intercity passenger rail service. Sharing track with other rail users requires a high level of schedule coordination to ensure efficiency and safety. Unlike Amtrak, commuter rail operations do not have a legal right of access to the general railroad system. For commuter rail operations to access freight-owned rail lines, the commuter rail operator must reach a voluntary agreement with the freight railroad. These agreements typically discuss liability issues, compensation for access and maintenance, and capacity. The Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008 established a forum at the Surface Transportation Board to help mediate stalled negotiations between commuter rail operators and freight railroads.

*Connections 2030* encourages coordination between different service providers; however, WisDOT does not have a direct role. WisDOT encourages service providers to continue working together to find agreeable solutions for all parties. Coordination is critical to the overall success of a commuter rail system. To provide a strong transportation system, it must include connections to regular community transit service, as well as provide other community transportation alternatives.

## ***Intermodal connections***

A well designed commuter rail service should be integrated with other transportation services. For example, the Kenosha Metra station is currently served by Kenosha Transit, taxi and regional commuter bus service. The station also provides sufficient parking for those who choose to drive. These services increase the number of transportation choices for individuals interested in using commuter rail service. Likewise, these services also increase an individual's mobility.

As new commuter rail service and stations are planned, communities and commuter rail operators should look for opportunities to create intermodal connections. *Connections 2030* notes WisDOT will:

- Improve coordination among transportation modes, including providing technical assistance in developing specific strategies for creating connections between modes and working with local governments to identify opportunities for new connections between modes
- Investigate funding opportunities and facilitate funding for intermodal facilities, including working with local communities and the private sector to identify opportunities for intermodal stations
- Increase the availability of alternative modes by implementing the policies identified in *Connections 2030*

These policies are continued and supported as part of *Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030*. For more information on these policies, see Chapter 8 of *Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030* or the "Facilitate intermodal passenger connections" policy in Chapter 8 of *Connections 2030*.

## ***Funding***

Funding is a major obstacle facing Wisconsin municipalities interested in studying and implementing commuter rail projects. Funding is needed to complete alternative analysis studies and support capital and operating expenses.

### **Federal funding**

Obtaining federal funding can be difficult. Many communities use Congressional earmarks to obtain federal funding to complete commuter rail studies. Additionally, to qualify for federal funding under the Federal Transit Administration's Section 5309 New Starts program, the project must have already completed an alternatives analysis. The New Starts program can provide up to 80 percent of capital funding, but typically only provides 50 percent of a system's total capital costs. New Starts funding can be used for preliminary engineering and final design. The federal New Starts program is highly competitive and requires considerable commitment by the local sponsor. In addition to the New Starts program, the Federal Transit Administration provides transit operating assistance under Section 5307. This funding assistance is available to all forms of public transit, including commuter rail.

### **State funding**

Wisconsin has two programs that can provide funding to rail transit. Under Section 85.063, Wis. Stats., WisDOT has the authority to administer an urban rail transit system program to assist in the planning, design and engineering of urban rail transit systems for urban areas in the state. An urban rail transit system is defined as a system, either publicly or privately owned, that provides transportation by rail to the public on a regular and continuing basis. WisDOT also has the authority to administer a commuter rail transit system development grant program.<sup>1</sup> Neither program is currently funded on an ongoing basis. *Connections 2030* made several recommendations concerning funding that could be future steps if commuter rail systems advance, but would require legislative direction:

- Funding assistance for planning, environmental and engineering studies for fixed-guideway transit from a stable funding source such as the Multimodal Planning Appropriation
- Explore funding options to support a fixed-guideway transit capital and operating assistance program with a mix of federal, state, and local funds

### **Local/regional funding**

To access available federal and state funding, local project sponsors are required to commit a share of the required resources. Transit governing bodies – such as regional transit authorities with revenue-raising authority – are commonly used across the country to administer and fund transit systems. These bodies typically have the authority to raise revenues to cover the local funding share of transit costs for all modes of public transit in a region. Of the regional transit authorities created under the 2009-2011 state budget, two had commuter rail-related interests:

- Southeast Regional Transit Authority – specific to the Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee commuter rail project; area includes all of Kenosha, Milwaukee and Racine counties
- Dane County Regional Transit Authority – required for municipalities located within the Madison metropolitan planning area; optional for municipalities located outside the planning area; may be used to help fund the recommendations of Transport 2020

Subsequent state legislation repealed the 2009 legislation that enabled the creation of these authorities. These two bodies are no longer in existence as of this writing. For more information on related *Connections 2030* policies, refer to the “Support public, specialized and human services transit” and “Support the development of fixed-guideway transit services” policies in Chapter 8 of *Connections 2030*.

### **Governance**

Political boundaries can present an obstacle for transit services, including commuter rail service. In some areas, there is insufficient coordination among transit providers to serve locations that cross county or municipal borders. The commuter rail projects studied in Wisconsin cross many municipal boundaries. Successful commuter rail service not only hinges on sufficient ridership and operating costs, it also hinges on the cooperation of local governments.

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<sup>1</sup> Section 85.064, Wis. Stats

Special purpose units of government for transit, such as regional transit authorities, can administer and fund transit systems on a region-wide basis. Regional transit authorities are common throughout the United States. Effective independent governing bodies:

- Address mobility needs on a regional basis
- Make various types of transit available in a particular region
- Recognize both rural and urban service areas
- Establish or expand dedicated local funding options and revenue-raising authority
- Coordinate or merge services with adjacent participating communities
- Encourage coordination among local governments and all regional transit services
- Encourage intermodal connections

For more information on these *Connections 2030* policies, refer to the “Support public, specialized and human services transit” and “Support the development of fixed-guideway transit services” policies in Chapter 8 of *Connections 2030*.

## **Commuter Rail Recommendations**

The following is a summary of *Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030* recommendations for commuter rail.

### ***Encourage coordination between rail providers***

WisDOT will encourage coordination and integration between commuter rail service, other local transit agencies and intercity passenger rail services.

### ***Facilitate intermodal connections with commuter rail***

As new commuter rail service and stations are planned, communities and commuter rail operators should look for opportunities to create intermodal connections. WisDOT will work to facilitate connections between all transit modes and intercity passenger rail, and provide technical assistance and funding for these efforts.

More details on facilitating intermodal connections recommendations can be found in Chapter 6: Intercity Passenger Rail, in Chapter 8: Livable and Sustainable Communities, and in *Connections 2030*.

### ***Support and provide funding for planned commuter rail projects in Wisconsin’s largest urban areas***

WisDOT will provide technical support and funding for planned commuter rail projects in Wisconsin’s largest urban areas, with a priority of projects that are in the advanced stages of planning. Specifically, as a future step if commuter rail projects advance, and pending legislative direction, WisDOT will:

- Work with the Wisconsin Legislature to restore funding in the Multimodal Planning Appropriation. This would allow WisDOT to provide funding assistance for planning, environmental and engineering studies for fixed-guideway transit from a stable funding source.
- Work with the state legislature to explore funding options to support a fixed-guideway transit capital and operating assistance program. The funding would cover up to 50 percent of the total nonfederal share of capital costs, or up to 25 percent of the total costs, whichever is lower. The state would also examine options for operating assistance for fixed-guideway transit projects to help cover a portion of the operating costs not covered by fare box or federal funds.
- Work with the legislature and local governments to examine options for transit governance, local funding and revenue-raising authority to administer and fund transit systems locally or regionally.

***Facilitate coordination between commuter rail, freight rail and intercity passenger rail services***

Commuter rail services generally operate on tracks owned by, or leased to, the freight railroads. Service may also operate on railroads where new or existing intercity passenger rail services may also be in operation. WisDOT will continue to encourage coordination between intercity passenger rail, freight rail, and commuter rail and will work with commuter rail project sponsors to define appropriate upgrades to ensure sufficient capacity for commuter rail without inhibiting freight or intercity passenger rail operations.