

Rising in the Midwest

Photo courtesy Joe LeMay

By Rich Sampson

The realization of plans for improved intercity passenger rail in the United States often seem to be cast in terms of light dawning on a distant horizon – infused with potential, but heretofar out of reach. And while substantial progress to that end has indeed been elusive on a nationwide basis, tangible evidence of improved intercity trains is apparent – and growing.

RAIL Magazine has previously chronicled such developments in states and regions across the country – from the Pacific Northwest to California, as well as in North Carolina and Maine. On October 30, 2006, intercity rail in the Midwest took a similar step forward with the doubling of state-supported Amtrak service in Illinois. The addition of more daily trains in the Midwest region is further proof that frequent, reliable and popular passenger rail is real, and need not be only understood in a distant vision.

[For more on the Midwest Rail Network, see RAIL #1 – ed]

Re-building Rail in the Midwest

Passenger rail service in the Midwest is inseparable from the cities, villages and towns that make up the region. For as long as there have been places such as Sturtevant, Wisc., or Kankakee, Ill., there have been trains bringing people and products to them. And while passenger rail saw a sharp and sustained downturn across the nation in the second half of the 20th century, passenger trains never really left here. After being winnowed to a single daily train in some areas – those bearing classic names such as *The City of New Orleans* or *Empire Builder*, continued by Amtrak after its 1971 inception – the trains, tracks and stations that literally built these communities are returning with

An Amtrak Illinois train races into the sunset on its trip south and west to Quincy.

renewed vigor and purpose.

When Congress created Amtrak in 1971, the investment it provided to support the railroad's operation allowed for just a handful of trips from its Chicago hub throughout the Midwest beyond its long-distance trains heading to locations such as Seattle, Wash. or New York City. Often, routes to regional locations like St. Louis, Mo. or Quincy, Ill. were crafted to maximize connections to the long-distance trains rather than provide the best regional service. But, as highways became congested and traffic volumes at airports such as Chicago's O'Hare and St. Louis' Lambert approached saturation, public officials at state and local governments in the Midwest increased their attention on passenger rail to improve connections between their communities. Long a vital thread

in the fabric of their cities and towns, the Midwest boasted a strong railroading infrastructure in the form of tracks and signals still used by freight railroads, historic stations and facilities well-positioned at the heart of community centers, and – most significantly – a fundamental appreciation for the value of railroads.

“Illinois has always been a supporter of Amtrak service in our state,” says State Representative Don Moffitt.

Faced with the prospect of the elimination of their daily train between Chicago and Quincy, a network of elected officials and community leaders from cities, towns and villages along the route presented their case for expanded passenger rail service in the state in 1971. Soon after, the State Legislature approved investment to support the continuation of service on the route. For Illinois, reconnecting with the state’s

railroading past was an easy decision.

“The State Assembly recognized that even in its infancy, Amtrak would play a crucial role in connecting Illinois,” says Moffitt. “We’re a state that’s been built by railroads, and even though priorities might have been different elsewhere in the country, we knew that passenger trains had a important place here.”

With the dye cast for state funding, the Midwest capitalized on that momentum to add additional service. State officials in Wisconsin worked with their neighbors to the south to improve the route between Chicago and Milwaukee. Already served by the daily roundtrip of the long-distance *Empire Builder*, which connects Chicago with Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Seattle, the two governments agreed in 1989 to a joint funding program to support the cost of additional service on the line. Wisconsin would contribute

75 percent of the cost, while Illinois would cover the remaining 25 percent. Using the historic name *Hiawatha*, the route initially hosted three daily roundtrips, but Wisconsin and Illinois support for the service has steadily increased to provide seven roundtrips Monday thru Saturday, with six trains operating on Sundays.

“Since 1989, we have committed almost \$100 million in capital and operating support for existing and future Amtrak service in Wisconsin,” Wisconsin Secretary of Transportation Frank Busalacchi told a U.S. Senate Committee. “This includes annual operating support, new or renovated stations, rail corridor acquisition, crossing improvements, and planning studies. The public has responded to all of these investments. Last year [2006], Amtrak’s *Hiawatha* carried 588,000 passengers – a 48 percent increase in just five years. Now, the public wants more.”

The 1979 version of the *Illinois Zephyr* – here striking out south from Chicago – marked one of the nation’s first state-supported intercity routes.

Photo courtesy Douglas G. Walker



The Big Catch

The success of the *Hiawatha* route set a new standard in the region for improving Amtrak service over existing routes. Illinois officials from Governor Rod Blagojevich to the General Assembly to the Department of Transportation found promising returns from their investment in the Illinois routes and the *Hiawatha*, and determined the time was right to advance the progress of intercity passenger rail in their state. This coalescing of support led to a vote by the General Assembly in May 2006 to double the State's investment for intercity trains, raising its annual funding from \$12.1 million to \$24.7 million. The increase marked the second-largest contribution of any state to intercity rail, trailing only California's \$72 million annual investment.

[For more on Amtrak's California network, see RAIL #11 - ed]

"Amtrak is an affordable travel option, and in many communities it's the only form of public transportation," said Blagojevich. "People want and use Amtrak; that's why we doubled our commitment to ensuring we have regular passenger rail service. During the past several years we've continued to see an increase in the people riding the

Cooperation with freight railroads, including BNSF on the Quincy route shown here at Galesburg, was crucial to deploying the new series of trains in Illinois.



Photo courtesy Erik Rasmussen

Three Illinois routes to Quincy, St. Louis and Carbondale saw four new daily trips debut last October.



Map courtesy Amtrak

Illinois state-sponsored trains."

Built from a grassroots-fueled effort led by the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, the Illinois Department of Transportation worked with Amtrak, the freight railroads which own the tracks, and representatives of communities along the lines to launch a new schedule of trains on the routes between Chicago and Quincy, St. Louis and Carbondale. Two new daily roundtrips would be added to the Chicago - Springfield - St. Louis route from the previous three, while an additional daily train would be introduced to the Chicago - Champaign - Carbondale and

Chicago - Galesburg - Quincy lines, bring those lines' totals to three and two daily roundtrips, respectively. The Chicago - Galesburg segment also hosts another two long distance trains - the *California Zephyr* to Oakland, Calif. and the *Southwest Chief* to Los Angeles, Calif. All told, state-supported service in Illinois totaled 22 daily roundtrip trains, including the *Hiawatha* line, after the increase.

"Our effort turned out to be successful because it was just a reasonable idea - improve what we have now without a massive need for dollars to support it," explains Richard Harnish, Executive Director of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association.

October 16, 2006 saw the full debut of the new armada of Illinois-supported trains across the state. Continuing the state's strong ties between railroading and history, each new trip was dubbed with a unique historic name. The *Carl Sandburg* joined the existing *Illinois Zephyr* on the line to Galesburg and Quincy, the new *Saluki* complemented the *Illini* and the long-distance *City of New Orleans* between Chicago, Champaign and Carbondale, and two new *Lincoln Service* trains augmented the two standing *Lincoln Service* trips as well as the long-distance *Texas Eagle* on the route to Springfield

and St. Louis. The new trains utilized Amtrak's standard fleet of locomotives and passenger coaches to form the consists.

The response to the new offering of trains was swift and substantial. Each new trip reported frequent sell-outs of seats since its inception, and the regional nature of the trains coupled with the good working relationships with the freight railroads that were needed to add additional service has led to on-time performance averaging over 90 percent for each of the state-supported trains. This fundamental element of the expanded operation – trains that are frequent, reliable and serve needed destinations – is proving that contemporary intercity passenger rail will draw both the public support and the necessary riders to ensure its vitality. In just the first three months of service, between November 2006 and January 2007, ridership increased by 69 percent over the same period a year earlier. The largest growth, not surprisingly, occurred on the line to Springfield and St. Louis where two new trains were added. The route nearly doubled its ridership from the November 2005 – January 2006 period, attracting 64,278 passengers during that time, compared with 32,936 the year before. The lines to Carbondale and Quincy reported 68 percent and 38 percent rates of growth, respectively, during that same period.

“These numbers demonstrate the demand for Amtrak in Illinois and tell us that we did the right thing when we doubled state support for passenger rail,” said Governor Blagojevich. “This increase in ridership tells me that the Federal government is headed in the wrong direction when it tries to slash funding for Amtrak.”

Translating Results into Vision

For leaders in Illinois and Wisconsin, the success of their state-supported intercity services not

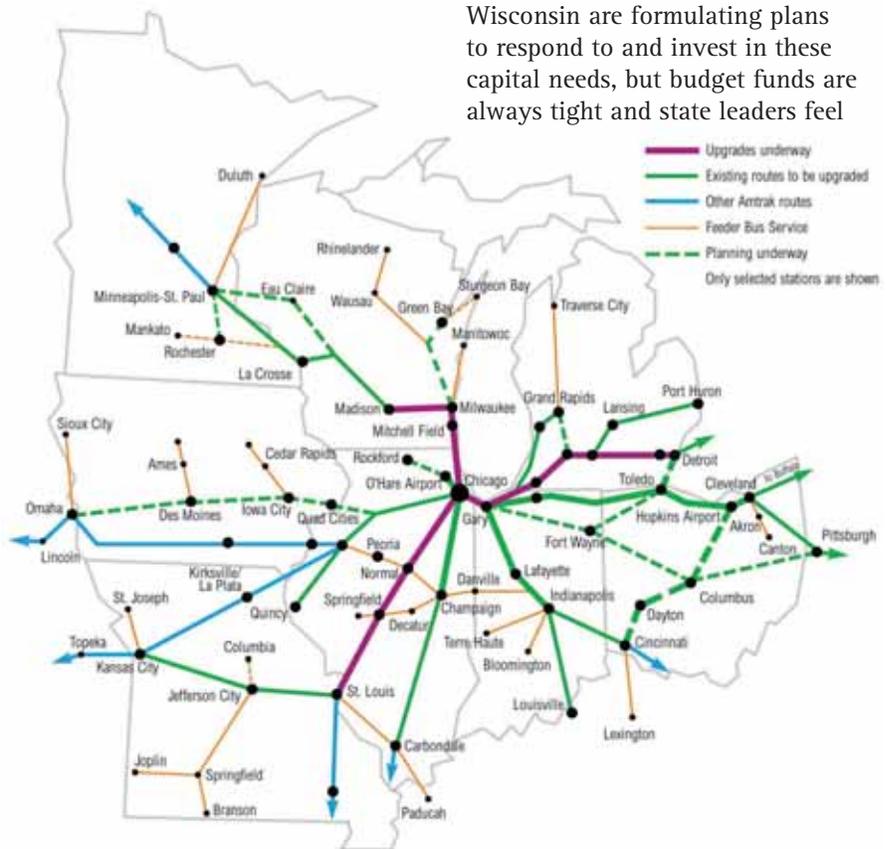
only indicates they made the right decision in expanding trips, but also establishes a blueprint for continued growth of the passenger rail network in the Midwest. The ability of the new trains to attract riders has built momentum for the potential of even greater strides in providing more and better intercity service.

Through a vision that embodies Midwestern sensibility, leaders will take first things first. Once the new trips have become established, additional frequencies on all four routes will be added. However, current railroad infrastructure and rolling stock is nearly at capacity following the recent expansion. New signaling systems, passing tracks, locomotives, passenger cars and station upgrades are all needed in order to build on the momentum. Similar work has already been completed on the St. Louis corridor, where new train control systems and double tracking have been added with investment through Amtrak, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the

Illinois Department of Transportation and the Union Pacific. Those enhancements allowed for greater speeds on the line and for the addition of the two new daily trains. Such projects are needed on other segments of that line, as well as those to Carbondale, Milwaukee and Quincy.

“We need to expand our railroad infrastructure and facilities in Illinois,” says George Weber of the Illinois Department of Transportation. “We’ve begun making some inroads at addressing capacity, especially on the St. Louis corridor, but much more is needed to move both passengers and freight through the state.”

At the same time, Amtrak has devoted nearly all locomotives and coaches it has in its fleet to operate the increased number of trips. New rolling stock is needed to run additional trains, as well as to add capacity to meet the demand for seats on the existing trips and improve efficiency. Both Illinois and Wisconsin are formulating plans to respond to and invest in these capital needs, but budget funds are always tight and state leaders feel



Map courtesy Midwest High Speed Rail Association



An Illinois *Lincoln Service* train passes through Bloomington en route to St. Louis in December 2006.

Photo courtesy Matt Kooi

they've more than held up their end of the investment bargain.

"We've taken a big step in our state to support intercity rail," says State Senator Jeffrey Schoenberg. "Now, we really need the federal government to become a equal partner in moving forward to realize even greater success for rail in Illinois and throughout the Midwest."

Beyond improving frequency on its existing routes, work is underway to study new lines and corridors that might be poised for similar success. Already, with the support of U.S. Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois and the Illinois Department of Transportation, Amtrak has conducted a study to return trains to a route serving Rockford, Ill., and Dubuque, Iowa that hasn't seen passenger trains since Amtrak's *Blackhawk* was terminated in 1981. Reinstated service, which could begin as soon as 2009 if Illinois state funding is approved, would likely bear the same name. Meanwhile, projects to inaugurate or improve

passenger rail in communities in Illinois and beyond are gathering steam. Now on the drawing boards are new routes to Decatur and Peoria in Illinois, and to Madison, Wisc., and the Quad Cities in Iowa.

Still further on the horizon are plans for a more substantial intercity passenger rail network throughout the Midwest. Goals for improved service to Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn., Kansas City, Mo., Indianapolis, Ind. and Detroit, Mich., among other routes, are in the formative states, as are projects to achieve higher-speed operation and electrification in the region to allow for even more frequent, reliable and useable train travel. The projected capital and operational investment needs for these efforts, however, are steep and would require significantly larger contributions from both federal and state sources than those provided for the recent service expansions.

"High speed rail is a natural outgrowth of a strong conventional rail system," says Harnish

Midwest Momentum

While there are no guarantees that these plans will come to fruition anytime in the immediate future, the ability of State and local leaders in Illinois and Wisconsin to work with Amtrak and the freight railroads to deliver investment and achieve concrete improvements in intercity train frequency and reliability underscores the ultimate value of passenger rail in connecting communities and regions.

Although a massive re-envisioning and obtaining of intercity passenger rail remains a prospect ahead in the distance, the recent achievements of improved frequency and service for Amtrak in the Midwest is a clear reminder that the train has left the station and bound for exciting and rewarding destinations

"We're really proving the case that high-quality, high-frequency passenger rail is attractive to many people, and is also attainable politically," says Harnish. 