

TWIN CITIES AREA TRANSPORTATION STUDY

Minutes

The Future of the Pere Marquette and the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative

February 24, 2010

10:00 A.M.

St. Joseph City Council Chambers

TWINCATS ENTITIES PRESENT:	<p>John Gruchot, Berrien County Community Development John Hodgson, City of St. Joseph Jason Latham, MDOT – Southwest Region Larry Merritt, St. Joseph Charter Township Pat Moody, Cornerstone Alliance / WesTrain Collaborative Bill Purvis, Twin Cities Area Transit Authority Marletta Seats, Berrien County Board of Commissioners Susan Solon, City of St. Joseph Paul South, MDOT – Coloma TSC Sarah Woolcock, MDOT – Coloma TSC Mamie Yarbrough, Berrien County Board of Commissioners</p>
SWMPC STAFF PRESENT:	<p>K. John Egelhaaf Nickolas Musson Anna Rahtz</p>
OTHERS PRESENT:	<p>Leonard Anderson Tom Angelo Jamie Beer Brian Bixby, Berrien County Board of Commissioners Don Boorma James Brooks Bob Burr, City of South Haven Theresa Cody, MDOT Susan Crow Mike Dumke Waymon Hodges Tim Hoeffner, MDOT Linda Hyde Mel Jessup Richard Johnson Michael Kuzmanich John Langdon, Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers Ron Lentz Jenny McNeil Elizabeth Meyer Jess Minks Dewe Mohr Roger Morresset John Proos, Michigan House of Representatives Al Pscholka, Office of Congressman Fred Upton Gary Ramberg Michael Ringler Joshua Schmidke Brian Shutts Daniel Sears Michael Selden, City of Bangor Robert Stanwood, Chestnut House B & B Rich Vavra-Musser, Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers Rachel Vochaska, South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce Tyanna Weller, St. Joseph Today Fred Westfield Barney Whittier, Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers Bill Wolf, Berrien County</p>

OPENING STATEMENT – 10:00 A.M.

K. John Egelhaaf, Executive Director

Southwest Michigan Planning Commission

- Mr. Egelhaaf introduced the purpose of the meeting. He stated that the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission had called this meeting so that Tim Hoeffner, Administrator of High Speed Rail and Innovative Project Advancement at the Michigan Department of Transportation, could speak to the community about the future of the Pere Marquette Amtrak line.
- He stated that Mr. Hoeffner oversees a team of experts in rail management at the Michigan Department of Transportation. That team is responsible for promoting and developing the infrastructure needed to support high speed inter-city passenger rail, commuter rail, and rail rapid transit services.
- Mr. Egelhaaf outlined the following agenda topics for the discussion:
 - To provide an opportunity to share information on the movement toward improved rail service in Michigan, including:
 - Recent federal high speed rail grant awards; and
 - Future rounds of federal high speed rail grants;
 - Clarity on 2010 budget cuts for Michigan's Amtrak subsidy (between 20 and 50 percent):
 - Which lines will be impacted?
 - What will be the impact on those lines?
 - Passenger Rail – part of a solution to safety, energy, congestion, and environmental challenges in the 21st Century?
 - The Federal government is increasing investment in rail, while the state is decreasing investment.
 - Is rail part of a state strategy to improve safety, energy efficiency, congestion, & environmental challenges (air quality, etc)?
 - The future of the Pere Marquette route:
 - The proposed elimination of the line in the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative plan; and
 - The threat that existing and future state subsidy cuts represent.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER –

Timothy Hoeffner, Administrator of High Speed Rail and Innovative Project Advancement Michigan Department of Transportation

- Mr. Hoeffner introduced two members of his team at MDOT, Jason Latham and Therese Cody.
- Mr. Hoeffner explained that Amtrak's ridership fare revenue and federal funding is supplemented by an operating subsidy through annual appropriations from the State of Michigan. The requests from Amtrak to the State of Michigan "have escalated to \$8 million." Mr. Hoeffner explained that all modes of transportation have taken a State funding hit in recent years.
- He mentioned that the State of Michigan was recently awarded a \$40 million grant from the federal government for high-speed rail development on the Detroit – Chicago line. He stated that this is the single largest capital investment that the United States government has ever made in high-speed rail.
- In reference to the subsidy for the Pere Marquette route, Mr. Hoeffner explained that the State of Michigan has identified bond funding that it will most likely use to replace cash for capital improvements for rail, and then transfer the cash to the fiscal year 2010 subsidies for the Pere Marquette and Blue Water lines. However, he stated that since the budget is renegotiated annually, he has no way of knowing what will happen with the Pere Marquette subsidy in fiscal year 2011.
- Giving background on the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative, Mr. Hoeffner explained that the nine-state initiative originated in the 1990s out of Milwaukee. Around 1998, the State of Michigan communicated with the WesTrain Collaborative, a group that had been formed to promote train travel in Western Michigan, about the potential plan for high-speed rail in Michigan. Mr. Hoeffner stated that the WesTrain group (with the exception of Pat Moody of the Cornerstone Alliance, the representative for the St. Joseph – Benton Harbor area), gave its approval of the plan. This included seven phases, of which Phase 5 would be realigning the Pere Marquette from Holland to Grand Rapids to Kalamazoo. This would take

service away from the St. Joseph and Bangor stops.

- Mr. Hoeffner explained that since twelve years have now passed and the Michigan Department of Transportation has greatly improved its stakeholder input processes, his department is planning to reevaluate the high-speed rail plan for Michigan. This will include taking input from a wide range of stakeholder groups.
- He clarified that right now his priority is focusing on retaining the operating funding to keep the Pere Marquette line going, before spending any additional dollars on studies.
- Mr. Hoeffner reiterated Amtrak now has the most federal support it has had in its history. He explained that public transportation was once viewed as a "last resort" mode of transportation, but the conversation about public transportation has "slowly shifted to one about economic development."

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION –

- In response to a question about the federal high-speed rail grant that had recently been awarded to the State of Indiana, Mr. Hoeffner explained that the grant will fund a study of the "rail bottleneck" between Porter, Indiana and Chicago, Illinois. He said the Federal Railroad Administration considered this a Tier 1 "shovel-ready" project. He estimated that construction will start late this fall and is scheduled to last 24 months. Mr. Hoeffner has had conversations with the other states involved in the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative as Governor Granholm's appointed representative for Michigan in the Midwest Governor's Leadership Group.
- When asked about the progress of the high-speed rail study for the portion of the Detroit – Chicago line in Michigan, Mr. Hoeffner estimated that the speed from Kalamazoo to New Buffalo could increase from 95mph to 110mph by March 2010.
- He explained that there are five major aspects of a rail line: 1) stations; 2) tracks; 3) equipment; 4) grade crossings; and 5) train control communications. He stated that the fifth item is the least visible to the public but has been the most important focus for the improvement of speed from Kalamazoo to New Buffalo.
- Mr. Hoeffner was asked if MDOT has considered other alternatives besides keeping the Pere Marquette the way it is or realigning it through Kalamazoo. Mr. Hoeffner responded that alternatives were studied. He stated that in the current proposal in the MWRI, St. Joseph would have a higher frequency of service than it currently does because it would have a "luxury charter bus" making three to five round-trips per day to Niles to connect to the high-speed corridor.
- Mr. Egelhaaf, moderating the discussion, brought up Mr. Hoeffner's previous comment about the WesTrain Collaborative "recommending" the realignment of the Pere Marquette through Kalamazoo. Mr. Egelhaaf remarked that, unlike the other areas represented in the WesTrain Collaborative, the Benton Harbor – St. Joseph area only had one representative and the metropolitan planning organization was not represented at all. Additionally, the other areas represented in WesTrain would not be affected negatively by the change in the route – only St. Joseph and Bangor. Thus, WesTrain was not the appropriate vehicle for providing all of the stakeholder input related to the plan.
- The City Manager of Bangor commented that the City of Bangor had had no knowledge of the high-speed rail plan when it was being finalized in the late 1990s. Additionally, in the current plan, the City of Bangor is not being provided with bus service like St. Joseph is.
- Pat Moody explained that he had founded the WesTrain Collaborative in the 1990s to rally support for keeping rail service when there was danger of its budget being cut. This had resulted in a partnership between the WesTrain Collaborative and MDOT. He added that initially, it was a collaborative of chambers of commerce, and the metropolitan planning organizations have since become heavily involved.
- A comment was made that the journey by train is currently only 176 miles from Grand Rapids to Chicago, as opposed to 211 miles when rerouted through Kalamazoo. Mr. Hoeffner responded that passengers are only concerned with the amount of time the journey takes, and the time is made up by the speed of the train being 110mph once it leaves Kalamazoo.
- Several comments were made regarding the increasing rates of ridership from the St. Joseph station. It was asked whether MDOT recognizes the value of train service for the communities along the Pere

Marquette.

- A comment was made that it may make more sense to run a train from Benton Harbor and St. Joseph to Niles, Michigan and South Bend, Indiana to connect to the Chicago South Shore line. The CSS has much higher frequencies, and there is a high demand for commuting between Northern Berrien County and Southern Berrien County / South Bend, IN area. Mr. Hoeffner responded that connecting to the South Shore was one of the options that were studied, and it had been discarded because the rail network in Northern Indiana is "one of the most complex rail networks in the world."
- A former passenger rail employee asked whether anyone on the MDOT high-speed rail study team has ever worked on a passenger railroad. Mr. Hoeffner responded that there is a former passenger railroad engineer on the team.
- The same gentleman then commented that Amtrak doesn't run on "short-line railroads" and asked who would cover the liability for Amtrak to run from Grand Rapids to Kalamazoo. Mr. Hoeffner responded that Amtrak covers its own liability, and it runs on several short-line railroads throughout the country.
- A comment was made regarding a rail study that had been done in the 1990s showing that Amtrak could cover much more of its operating budget with fare revenue, if only it were allowed to advertise at the casinos. However, regulations prevent State money from being used to advertise at casinos. A discussion was brought up on the restriction of uses for government dollars, and Mr. Hoeffner clarified that the State can make investments in private railroads.
- There was discussion on dispatchers causing time delays because of the complexity of dispatching freight and passenger trains on the same tracks. A CSX employee commented that CSX has spent millions of dollars upgrading the tracks on its own dollar, which has benefitted passenger rail, and also that CSX has always given passenger trains the priority. One problem has been that Canadian Pacific trains are too long to wait on the side track, and thus have had to be let through.
- A resident of Dowagiac commented that trains are already full in Dowagiac, and there will not be enough seats for passengers coming from Kalamazoo. Mr. Hoeffner responded that part of the high-speed rail plan is increased frequency of service.
- A discussion was brought up about the Detroit area, and the potential commuter rail to bring passengers in toward the high-speed rail line.
- State Representative Proos distributed a letter he had written to MDOT, stating that the State budget should be cutting programs that do not work but keeping programs that do work. Given the increasing ridership numbers from the St. Joseph area, there is no reason to cut rail service from that area.

ADJOURNMENT: 11:35 A.M.

K. John Egelhaaf, Executive Director

Southwest Michigan Planning Commission

- Mr. Egelhaaf thanked Mr. Hoeffner for his time, and stated that the community will be looking forward to being involved in continued conversation about high-speed rail.
- He asked everyone in attendance to leave their name and contact information on the sign-in sheet so that they could be contacted in the future. (To receive monthly email updates about regional transportation, send an email to rahtza@swmpc.org).

Compiled by: SWMPC staff, 2/25/10

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