



the **herald-palladium**

Southwest Michigan

Local News

Turmoil on the tracks

Print Page



The St. Joseph City Commission chamber was packed Wednesday for the meeting. John Madill / H-P staff

At Wednesday meeting, state official says budget cuts and high speed rail plans yearly push Pere Marquette to the brink, but route is safe for 2010

By SCOTT AIKEN - H-P Staff Writer

Published: Thursday, February 25, 2010 1:09 PM EST

ST. JOSEPH - Changes in Amtrak's Pere Marquette train route recommended years ago will not be made without a fresh study and public hearings, a state official said Wednesday.

"We will reopen it. We will take another look," Timothy Hoeffner, administrator of the Michigan Department of Transportation's Office of High Speed Rail, told a crowd at St. Joseph City Hall.

Plans drawn up in 1998 when the state was mapping out the future of high-speed passenger rail service proposed dropping St. Joseph and Bangor as stops on the Pere Marquette. The line provides daily service between Grand Rapids and Chicago.

The recommended route would originate in Holland, which is now a stop, then go to Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo and west to Chicago.

Hoeffner said the change will not happen until MDOT conducts an updated study and has public meetings in communities that would be affected.

"At this point we have not made an effort to go forward with that," he told a crowd of 60 people.

The meeting was organized by the Southwest Michigan Commission, a regional planning group, to provide information about the status of the Pere Marquette route and progress in developing high-speed rail service.

Last month, the federal government announced that Michigan, Indiana and Illinois would get \$244 million to continue development of the Detroit-Chicago route. The stimulus money is part of \$8 billion being parceled out to further high-speed rail projects in the U.S.

Businesses and local government officials said maintaining Pere Marquette service is very important to the area's economy, which is increasingly dependant on tourism and the increasing popularity of second home ownership.

The portion of the route in Michigan uses freight tracks owned by CSX Transportation Co. More than 110,000 passengers used the Pere Marquette in 2008, which figures to about 301 persons per day.

Sections of the Pere Marquette and Blue Water routes in Michigan are partially supported by state subsidies. Blue Water trains connect Chicago and Port Huron.

In a letter to MDOT Director Kirk Steudle, five state representatives from west Michigan districts said that scaling back the Pere Marquette or eliminating it "would be disastrous to families and economies through the Midwest."

The plan for high-speed rail was developed in the 1990s by nine states in the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative. Recommended routes for development of high-speed rail were between Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Louis.

MRRRI is a multibillion-dollar plan aimed at improving passenger rail service for trips of up to several hundred miles. Upgrades were to be done in seven phases over 10 years, but little money was committed until this year.

As part of the plan, consultants looked at the current Pere Marquette route and the altered route that would eliminate St. Joseph and Bangor as stops.

By routing the Pere Marquette from Holland to Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo, passengers would then have a choice of continuing to Chicago or changing trains and going to Detroit. The existing Pere Marquette route travels only between Grand Rapids and Chicago.

The route change proposal was endorsed by a majority of the members of Westrain Collaborative, a group formed in 1993 by chambers of commerce in west Michigan to restore daily service on the Pere Marquette route and to build ridership.

Pat Moody, who represents Cornerstone Alliance in Westrain, opposed the route change but said the group has been effective in preserving the Pere Marquette, which is often threatened with funding cuts.

MDOT's view that the route change is not definite means Pere Marquette can be saved, Moody said.

"Hopefully, if the door is truly open we can keep it open," he said.

Funding problem is perennial

A more immediate problem for survival of the route may be funding.

Hoeffner discussed the funding "fire drill" that occurs annually, and said it appears that enough state money will become available for the current state fiscal year, which runs through Sept. 30.

Amtrak requested an \$8 million state subsidy for the Pere Marquette and Blue Water routes. The

Legislature appropriated \$5.7 million, but additional sources of revenue have been identified, Hoeffner said.

Action is required by the Legislature to make the money available, he said.

"I can't say what's going to happen in fiscal year 2011," he said. "We're still in a difficult budget situation with the state."

The state subsidy was about \$1 million a year in the 1980s and into the 1990s. The federal government, which supports Amtrak, the national passenger rail service, then began applying pressure to get more money from states.

The Pere Marquette had stable annual ridership of about 75,000 people a year until Amtrak attempted to cut costs by reducing service to five days a week in the early 1990s.

Ridership fell to 30,000 a year until seven-day service was restored. According to MDOT, ridership grew every year from 2002 through 2008. The number fell last year, a decline blamed on the poor economy.

"This is a service we would like to have around for a long time," Hoeffner said.

Stimulus money more for congestion

Most of the \$244 million in federal economic stimulus money to continue developing the Detroit-Chicago high-speed rail corridor will be used by Illinois and Indiana to address the congestion problem at Porter, Ind., about midway between downtown Chicago and St. Joseph.

Rail traffic from Michigan will get an immediate benefit by eliminating the gigantic rail bottleneck, work that will cost \$203 million.

More than 100 trains travel daily through the 40-mile corridor between Porter and Chicago. The 14 Amtrak trains that travel between Michigan and Chicago each day go through Porter on the same freight line track.

"Getting in and out of Chicago, it's some of the most complex rail infrastructure in the world," he said.

The allocation of stimulus money also includes \$40 million to build new railroad stations in Troy and Dearborn and upgrade the Battle Creek station.

Michigan has been working for years to ready the corridor for trains traveling up to 125 mph. Trains on the route, Amtrak's Wolverine, stop in Niles, Dowagiac and New Buffalo.

Between Kalamazoo and New Buffalo, trains can already travel 95 mph. Speeds of 110 mph could be allowed later this year with certification of train control and communication systems.

In response to a question, Hoeffner said the work at Porter would take an estimated two years to complete, but it's too early to say when the project will begin.

saiken@TheH-P.com

Copyright © 2010 - Herald Palladium

[x] Close Window

