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TOP STORY

## Keeping the Pere Marquette on track

Some suggest the Amtrak line should shut down

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer Dec 27, 2018 Updated Dec 27, 2018



An Amtrak train travels through Benton Harbor several years ago along the Pere Marquette line between Chicago and Grand Rapids, which has faced pressure in the past to close.

HP file photo

ST. JOSEPH — The Pere Marquette Amtrak train – which runs from Chicago through St. Joseph and Bangor to Holland and Grand Rapids – could run out of steam in the future, and local planners are taking steps now to make sure it keeps running.

Last week, the Twin Cities Area Transportation Study passed resolutions in support of keeping the passenger rail line operating, and also recommended a study of connecting the tracks in New Buffalo to increase service.

This was in response to a study last year that proposed a "coast-to-coast" rail service from Chicago to Kalamazoo, with connections to Grand Rapids, Lansing and Detroit, and the possible decommissioning of the Pere Marquette line for passenger service. A 2004 report also suggested mothballing the Pere Marquette.

Ryan Fellows, an associate planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, which coordinates TwinCATS, said this isn't anything that is going to happen right away, "but we don't want to be left behind."

He said TwinCATS is committed to seeing that the Pere Marquette remains a successful, competitive rail line into the future by promoting improvements that will increase efficiency and ridership. The organization maintains that there is room for the three existing rail lines and the coast-to-coast service.

Most of the 176-mile Pere Marquette line is owned by CSX Railroad and accommodates freight cars as well as the Amtrak service, which started in 1984.

Along with the Pere Marquette, passenger service from Chicago includes the Blue Water line through Niles, Dowagiac, Kalamazoo and Battle Creek, to Port Huron; and the Wolverine line connecting Chicago to Detroit-Pontiac. All three are supported with state funding through the Michigan Department of Transportation.

A TwinCATS presentation stated that "in the competition for funding the Pere Marquette could lose if existing stakeholders do not lead the Pere Marquette into a more efficient, reliable and safe future. ... Pere Marquette stakeholders need to clearly state that passenger rail is important."

From 2007 to 2017, the Pere Marquette, among nine Midwest lines, was one of two that saw a decline in annual ridership, with a drop of 11 percent, to 93,449 customers.

The Blue Water line saw a 46 percent increase in that same period, and the Wolverine line ridership went up 2 percent.

The Pere Marquette did see a rebound from 2016 to 2017, when ridership increased 4.4 percent and generated \$3.2 million in ticket sales.

As of Dec. 21 of this year, Pere Marquette had carried 87,128 passengers. At the St. Joseph station, 6,892 passengers boarded the train, while 6,623 deboarded. At Bangor, 1,942 boarded and 1,832 deboarded.

One of the recommendations in the 2004 Midwest Regional Rail System executive report was to upgrade the Wolverine's tracks to 110 miles per hour, which has been mostly completed. It also recommended service from Chicago to Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids and Holland. Under that recommendation, service to Bangor would

have been discontinued and a bus connection would have been started from St. Joseph to the Niles station.

In 2009 the New Buffalo station was relocated from the CSX tracks to the Amtrak line, and the Pere Marquette train no longer makes stops there. The TwinCATs resolution recommends that the tracks be connected again, providing access to the high-speed rail that runs through New Buffalo, along with additional connections to other destinations.

The 2017 Midwest report says that by connecting Chicago with Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids and Detroit, ridership could increase from 200,000 to 1.5 million, with connections to cities throughout the region.

Pere Marquette's stations do not have a large enough population to attract the ridership that the new coast-to-coast could accommodate.

This is not the the first time that Pere Marquette has faced threats of closing. Several times, going back decades, the possibility of its extinction has been discussed because of shrinking funding and other factors. But the line has up to now dodged the bullet as leaders rallied to keep it going.

That's what needs to happen now, along with other actions, Fellows said. The line has tried to boost ridership with special stops for such events as the Senior PGA at Harbor Shores in Benton Harbor, and the Tulip Festival in Holland.

A rail connection at New Buffalo, linking the Pere Marquette CSX tracks and Amtrak's Wolverine and Blue Water lines, would allow the Pere Marquette trains to operate on the 110 mile per hour tracks between New Buffalo and Porter, Ind. and continuing on to Chicago, according to TwinCATS. This is expected to improve intercity service and allow Pere Marquette and Wolverine-Blue Water passengers to transfer to other trains.

"A feasibility and engineering study is a necessary step prior to establishing a rail connection in New Buffalo to link the Pere Marquette and Wolverine-Blue Water services," the TwinCATS presentation recommends.

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