

Leaving the Station

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The Christmas tree backdrop at a Monday news conference regarding passenger rail service made it tough not to think of holiday shopping excursions to Chicago. But Mayor David Berger of Lima, Ohio, wanted everyone to know it's much bigger than that.

"It's really important for 21st-century communities to have multi-modal transportation opportunities for everyone," he said at the Baker Street Train Station announcement. "This rail corridor, with airport connections, creates an opportunity for connections to the world. That's really the way we ought to be thinking about this rail line. It's not just a way for those of us to get to downtown Chicago to do some Christmas shopping. It's about major connections to our world – for our businesses, for businesses around the world to get to us."

Lima, along with Fort Wayne, is a step closer to the return of a passenger rail service with news that the Federal Railroad Administration will conduct the study required to establish a rail line between Chicago and Columbus, Ohio. It's an encouraging boost for economic development and quality-of-life efforts here.

City Councilman Geoff Paddock, D-5th, Mayor Tom Henry and members of the Northern Indiana Passenger Rail Association made the announcement this week. Passenger rail service in Fort Wayne was discontinued 26 years ago.

"Moving forward with an environmental assessment is tantamount to stating that transportation officials in Washington and Indianapolis are likely to recognize and promote (that) the next line that will connect millions of people will be here," said Paddock, a NIPRA board member and tenacious advocate for passenger rail. "I believe that with the successful conclusion of this assessment, which is about to begin very shortly and will conclude by late 2017, that preliminary engineering and funding could come forward to make the necessary upgrades to tracks, signals, highway junctions – even stations – to bring passenger rail service back to Fort Wayne by the early 2020s."

Fred Lanahan, NIPRA board president, noted the process had taken a long time but was worth the effort.

"This is the beginning of the restoration of passenger rail service in Fort Wayne," he said. "We are partnering with the Federal Rail Administration – we are now on their queue to get this done. We've raised money. We've gone to various cities. We've gone to the city of Fort Wayne; Allen County has chipped in. This is the beginning of the last lap – come hell or high water, we're going to have it here by 2020."

The \$350,000 analysis, which includes \$200,000 in CEDIT funds approved by City Council in 2014, begins early next year and is expected to be finished by late fall. That first trip to Chicago or Columbus – with connections far beyond – is getting closer, thanks to NIPRA and the public officials who haven't given up on a good idea.