

Dec. 18 - Northern Indiana Passenger Rail Association continues to pursue passenger rail service in Fort Wayne

By Mary Anne Gates For Business Weekly
Dec 18, 2022



A map of the proposed Chicago to Fort Wayne to Columbus train route.

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The Northern Indiana Passenger Rail Association (NIPRA) met Dec. 15 to discuss ongoing efforts to bring passenger rail service back to Fort Wayne. The all-volunteer group works on several fronts with legislators and other interested individuals.

Currently, there is no timetable for restoring passenger rail service in the city. However, earlier in the day NIPRA officials met with ProPEL US 30 INDOT representatives.

“We made it clear we were there not in opposition to the US 30 project,” Craig Bloom, NIPRA treasurer, said.

We were very favorable to that, but it would be a shame if they didn’t look at our project in conjunction with that (US 30 project).

"Ultimately, it would save taxpayers a lot of money because that track runs almost parallel with 30."

Also, NIPRA presented several talking points supporting attempts to restore rail service in conjunction with the proposed US 30 highway upgrade. ProPEL is an INDOT initiative that streamlines transportation planning.

The NIPRA talking points to ProPEL included:

- The US 30 highway upgrade planning effort should be combined with the proposed passenger rail line that closely parallels the US 30 highway between Fort Wayne and Valparaiso
- The Northern Indiana Passenger Rail project serves cities and towns across northeast Indiana...driving economic development in city centers along the route
- Both projects benefit the state. The US 30 upgrades benefit businesses while passenger rail serves the needs of residents and communities across northeast Indiana.
- Significant funding is available for both the US 30 highway upgrade and for the Northern Indiana Passenger Rail project.

INDOT is at the beginning of a two-year process that is studying how the US 30 project will move forward.

Additionally, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) announced the previous week they have started accepting applications for \$2.3 billion in passenger grants. According to the FRA website a notice of funding opportunity for the Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail Grant Program has begun.

"This is one of the two most significant investments in the past 50 years to modernize passenger train service across the country," Pete Buttigieg, Transportation Secretary, said in a news release, according to the website www.trains.com.

“We are well poised to ask for and receive funds. We are urging the Indiana Department of Transportation to seek federal funding for the Chicago, to Fort Wayne, to Columbus route, The window of opportunity is right now...we are urging INDOT to apply for federal funds," Geoff Paddock, 5th District city councilman and NIPRA board member, said. Adding, “Then we want to work with them on obtaining state 20% matching funds.”

Many major infrastructure projects are paid for with an 80/20 split in funds. Although, the amount of the split can vary. Often, the federal government provides 80% of the money, while State or other non-federal entities can fund 20% of the total cost of the project.

According to Paddock, at least two state representatives were “very enthusiastic” at, yet another meeting intended to move the NIPRA project forward.

“We are asking Reps. David Abbott, Rome City, and Sharon Negele, Attica (near West Lafayette), to help us with state funding. They have indicated an interest in getting a line item in the budget for 2023. The possible amount of state funding ... could be as much as 20%,” Paddock said.

Adding, “That is still being worked out. Our anticipation is most of the 20% would be State funding, but it could be a combination of other funding.”

However, even if federal and state funding sources earmarked for local passenger rail service line up, there is no guarantee the project will get off the ground quickly.

“This (passenger rail service) could still be years away,” Paddock, a longtime NIPRA board member, said.

Additionally, Paddock estimated a cost of \$3 million to \$5 million per mile for bringing rail service to Fort Wayne. Besides the main track, a passing track is needed for freight trains, any overpass or road construction costs, and signaling devices all add to the cost.

Finally, the proposed Chicago to Columbus route with a stop in Fort Wayne is in addition to the current Amtrak passenger train service at Waterloo. Similarly, a South Shore passenger train route serving northwest Indiana is not expected to be impacted by adding the proposed Columbus to Chicago route.

“This is not about relocating the (rail) line from Waterloo. This has nothing to do with Waterloo or South Shore. This rail line is in addition to Waterloo and South Shore,” Paddock said.

More Information

For more information about NIPRA and passenger rail service go to: info@niprarail.org

For more information about the INDOT ProPEL US 30 project go to: <https://propelus30.com>

For more information about the FRA \$2.3 billion in grant money go to: <https://www.trains.com>

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