

Progress through Partnerships:

The History of the Northeast Indiana Passenger Rail Association

The Northeast Indiana Passenger Rail Association and the City of Fort Wayne are leading the effort to bring passenger rail back through northeast Indiana while connecting Chicago, Illinois to Columbus, Ohio. The partnerships of this effort has progressed far enough that the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) sponsored the submission of a grant to the FRA for funding the required Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The chapter provides a history of NIPRA and their partnerships.

Indiana has been active in midwest passenger rail development since signing as one of the original members of the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI) in 1995. Citizens of Fort Wayne became involved in the initiative to bring passenger rail to back to their city in early 2000, when Dekalb County, Waterloo and Auburn representatives serving on the Northeastern Indiana Regional Coordinating Council (NIRRC), the local Metropolitan Planning Organizations¹ (MPO), expressed that their communities did not like the rail stop in Waterloo and requested the route return to Fort Wayne. After hearing this, local NIRRC representatives, including Geoff Paddock (current Fort Wayne City Councilman) decided to step up efforts for bringing passenger rail back to Fort Wayne. Paddock was originally Governor Evan Bayh's appointee to the NIRRC Board, and he was reappointed by the late Governor Frank O'Bannon. Paddock and other NIRRC representatives approached Governor O'Bannon and the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) for assistance with this initiative.

In 2002, INDOT, along with Ohio Rail Development Commission and Amtrak, co-sponsored the routing study, the Northern Indiana/Northwestern Ohio Routing Study, which resulted in Fort Wayne being selected as an intermediary stop on a proposed high-speed rail line between Chicago and Cleveland. This more southern route eastward was chosen as part of the final Midwest Regional Rail System plan adopted in 2004.

Unfortunately for Fort Wayne, political push back arose from South Bend Statehouse representatives, who also wanted this high-speed passenger rail stop. These political pressures resulted in no line being officially promoted by the State of Indiana, and

with the economy failing in 2007, discussions of any passenger rail expansions weakened, as government at all levels struggled to just meet basic needs.

Then in 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA; P.L. 111-5) became the new federal funding source that would reinvigorate the development of high-speed passenger rail (HSR) transportation throughout the United States.

The Northeast Indiana Passenger Rail Association (NIPRA) originated as an ad hoc advocacy alliance sponsored by Invent Tomorrow, an organization formed in 2000 to tackle Fort Wayne's economic development issues and improve the community's image. In 2007, recognizing the substantial economic benefit of re-establishing passenger rail service through northern Indiana, the City of Fort Wayne City Council passed a resolution supporting the return of service. Then, in 2009, NIPRA incorporated and established a fifteen-member board consisting of representatives of private industries, municipalities and elected officials. At this time, Mayor Thomas Henry directed the City to provide funding and staff resources to support the work of NIPRA.

Fort Wayne rail supporters knew they needed to make a concerted effort to bring passenger rail back to their city and in 2009, INDOT became a signatory to the Memorandum of Understanding among eight (8) states and the city of Chicago, agreeing to seek and coordinate funding from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) and beyond. INDOT's application for \$2.8 billion of ARRA included funding for the Tier 1 and Tier 2 EIS for the Chicago-Fort Wayne-Toledo and on to Cleveland route of the MWRRI, construction dollars for the Chicago-Cleveland corridor, and money to upgrade the Chicago-Indianapolis-Cincinnati line to 110mph. This sizeable proposal was not awarded any money.



The Chicago-Fort Wayne-Columbus Corridor is a unique rail initiative because it has developed from the bottom up rather than the more traditional top down approach. Cities and local communities along the route have led the effort in promoting and fundraising for the business analysis and EIS studies. Rail development has traditionally been spearheaded at the state level; with the federal government approached later for assistance. Local governments may have money in station development but have rarely been involved at the onset of the effort.

This bottom up approach has both benefits and risks. The main benefit is the broad base of support for the corridor developed even before seeking state or federal money. With already hundreds of supportive fans, including many businesses and educational institutions, higher level government officials take notice and are compelled to give their support. The risk of this approach could happen during the federal government required EIS process as the current method analyzes the environmental impact of new routes between two designated endpoints. This method could impact all of the projected “passenger rail stop” communities along the Chicago-Fort Wayne-Columbus Corridor who have already funded or committed to funding this particular route. The traditional analysis may need to be altered to allow for the stops within these communities. This Chicago-Fort Wayne-Columbus Corridor is not to this point in the process but will be very soon.

The Chicago-Fort Wayne-Columbus Corridor actually has its geographic roots in two prior regional rail planning initiatives. The MWRRI lists a route from Chicago through Fort Wayne and the Ohio Hub Plan lists a route from Fort Wayne to Columbus. Individually these plans identified the strong economic benefit of connecting rail service from Fort Wayne to both Chicago and Columbus. Relying on these studies for support, NIPRA used this opportunity to expand their role from advocate to leader and expanded their efforts to develop the entire Chicago-Fort Wayne-Columbus Corridor (Corridor).

The first of the two studies, the MWRRI network, was completed in 2004. Planning had begun nearly a decade earlier with collaboration by Amtrak, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), and nine Midwest states, including Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. This initiative proposed the Chicago to Fort Wayne corridor, although the connecting Ohio city on this plan was Toledo. A second regional initiative, the Ohio Hub Plan, developed as an adjunct to the MWRRI and focused on Ohio rail connections. One corridor designated in the Ohio Hub Plan is the Columbus to Fort Wayne route. The Ohio Hub Plan was approved for Federal ARRA funding in 2009, but Ohio Governor Kasich did not support passenger rail development at the time and this eventually led the FRA to recoup the funds from Ohio.

The approximately 315-mile corridor from Chicago, Illinois, through Fort Wayne, Indiana and on to Columbus, Ohio is essentially a combination of the Chicago to Fort Wayne section of the Chicago Hub Network presented in the MWRRI, and the Fort Wayne to Columbus section of the Ohio Hub Plan. The Corridor will link to the Chicago Hub Network, where substantial investment has already been made in developing the MWRRI to the neighboring states.

The forging of the partnership between the City of Fort Wayne and NIPRA would solidify efforts for the development of a Chicago-Fort Wayne-Columbus route. At a “Rally for Rail” held at refurbished Baker Street Station, hundreds of people including numerous government officials, joined together to inform Derrick James, a senior government affairs officer with Amtrak, how much they wanted passenger rail back in Fort Wayne. Then, at the urging of then Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, and satisfied with the progress of their initiative, NIPRA, Fort Wayne and Columbus joined together to test the initial route feasibility.

The group contracted with Transportation Economics and Management, Inc. (TEMS), to complete a business impact study. The study was paid for with donations from a variety of sources including local governments, businesses and foundations. The TEMS study process began in 2011 and the report was completed in December 2012.

Also, during 2011 Mayor Tom Henry began a community initiative, Legacy Fort Wayne, which allowed Fort Wayne residents to have a voice in identifying potential “transformational” projects for improving the community. The return of passenger rail rated as a high priority in the community and set the stage for the City of Fort Wayne to pledge the first major contribution, \$200,000, to the funding of the Tier 1 EIS. This first pledge played a crucial role in convincing other funding sources throughout Indiana and Ohio that Fort Wayne and NIPRA are seriously committed to return passenger rail to the city.

The TEMS study originally identified projected stops along the route to include Chicago in Illinois; Gary, Valparaiso, Plymouth, Warsaw, and Fort Wayne, in Indiana; Lima, Kenton, Marysville, Hilliard and downtown Columbus, in Ohio. However, during the final stage of the study, the City of Columbus pushed for an adjustment of the route. Columbus proposed the elimination of the stop at Hilliard, Ohio and introduced a stop at Port Columbus International Airport. The TEMS technical analysis for the section from downtown Columbus to the Port Columbus Airport was never completed due to lack of funding. An Executive Summary completed in February of 2013, did eliminate the Hilliard stop and added Port Columbus Airport, as requested by the City of Columbus. In spring of 2014, Columbus Mayor Coleman contracted for a study to complete, among other tasks, a feasibility analysis of the downtown Columbus to the Port Columbus International Airport portion of the corridor.

After the completion of the TEMS Study, NIPRA and Fort Wayne city staff shifted to a more active role and began developing strong partnerships with representatives of the Indiana and Ohio communities along the corridor. To facilitate continual dialog in Indiana, NIPRA has coordinated quarterly meetings with the Indiana mayors, community representatives, congressional and senatorial staff members representing the corridor, MPO staff and other key stakeholders. Additionally, several meetings involving the entire corridor have occurred and will continue to occur as the initiative progresses. These

meetings have generally been hosted by individual mayors along the corridor with NIPRA members and City of Fort Wayne staff assisting with the invitations, agendas and personal phone calls to ensure maximum attendance. Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC), the MPO for Columbus Ohio, has been instrumental in coordinating efforts throughout Ohio.

Meetings throughout the corridor have been instrumental in keeping the process moving and holding all the partners accountable. These meetings also ensure that the partners maintain a consistent and productive message about the project and that the leaders of the impacted communities are up-to-date on all accomplishments. These meetings have been a platform for discussing topics including the establishment of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), fundraising strategies, and tactics for creating a larger network of supporters. The next step in the corridor development process for which NIPRA has been strategizing, is to further organize the partnerships, define roles and plan for raising funds for the legally required Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement.

Although all partners agreed on the principal need for a MOA, the actual production and execution of the document would test NIPRA, Fort Wayne staff and MOPRC's ability to coordinate, collaborate and implement joint processes among the corridor members. With an initial projected signing deadline of spring 2014, the effort to accommodate all necessary changes by all partnering cities substantially prolonged its completion. Draft changes included adding small sections of detail about each city with a rail stop, adding language about coordinating fundraising using a mutually agreed-upon strategy, and adding a section about future signatories to the MOA. All partnering cities eventually signed the MOA by September of 2014. Additional work is being done to include signatures of county executives, INDOT and Ohio DOT staff, and the five MPO's along the corridor on the MOA.

When fundraising for the Tier 1 EIS began in earnest, all involved NIPRA and City staff members contacted educational institutions, not-for-profits and private entities to gain support for the corridor and raise funds for the Tier 1 EIS. At a meeting late in 2013, NIPRA and City staff members offered up their services to identify, contact and meet with possible funding contributors along the Indiana portion of the corridor. NIPRA members

traveled hundreds of miles throughout the Corridor making presentations and successfully obtaining over \$450,000 in pledges and contributions.

This procurement of funds placed the progress of the corridor in an optimal position to apply for an FRA grant, which was an unexpected opportunity that arose in the fall of 2014. If received, FRA funding will speed up the process of completing the Tier 1 EIS, as the program allows an 80/20 arrangement with the federal government funding the 80%. The remaining 20% was pledged equally from the Indiana and Ohio partners. NIPRA and supporting staff members are hopeful that early and consistent contact with the regional FRA program manager, along with the presentation given by MORPC to FRA Administrator Joseph Szabo, will improve the Corridor's chances of being awarded grant funds.

Recognizing that the role of the INDOT may be minimal in the beginning stages of generating and organizing the corridor's support, NIPRA still insures that they remain in contact with INDOT's rail staff throughout the progress, sending email updates, inviting them to meetings and conference calls and personal phone calls when necessary. This partnership was crucial when the FRA grant opportunity arose, as the State was the only entity eligible and willing among the Corridor partners to apply for the grant. After agreeing to be the signatory, INDOT requested NIPRA and City of Fort Wayne staff members to draft the application and gather all supporting documents. As of this writing it is not known if the grant application will be successful but regardless of the grant outcome the corridor partners will continue in their efforts to build the Chicago-Fort Wayne-Columbus Corridor.

With the knowledge that the application had to demonstrate coordination and organization throughout the entire corridor, NIPRA and City staff members used this opportunity to encourage progress from the partners in Ohio. After the fallout of the failed Ohio Hub Study and feeling the constraints of political pressure from constituents and the Ohio Governor's office, the City of Columbus Mayor had been reluctant to weigh in on the project. Within the final hours before grant submission, and while still remaining publicly quiet about his support, Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman signed the MOA and provided documentation committing the City of Columbus to raising their share of funds for Ohio's local match if the federal grant should be rewarded.

Future work needed includes discussions on project oversight of the Tier 1 EIS, decisions on a management entity for the corridor itself, project oversight and financing decisions, and even the naming of the Corridor.

Since 2009, NIPRA has also been supporting the further development of the Detroit-Chicago rail corridor as they work toward higher speeds and additional train sets. This project is currently undergoing the Tier 1 EIS, under the management of the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT). A portion of the corridor, from Gary into Chicago, is proposed to serve as part of the Chicago-Fort Wayne-Columbus route. In their EIS analysis, MDOT indicated that they would include the rail traffic of the Fort Wayne route from Gary, Indiana into downtown Chicago.

NIPRA and the City of Fort Wayne have also been meeting with rail advocates from Toledo as they seek to develop the Chicago-Fort Wayne-Toledo connection. This initiative is not yet as strong as the work with Columbus but is being pursued as another great economic boost for northern Indiana communities.

Recent discussions with corridor partners have produced a recommendation that federal and state government representatives from along the corridor also be invited to participate in future meetings.

¹ Metropolitan Planning Organizations were created by Congress to ensure that region-wide plans were developed through intergovernmental cooperation and rational analysis.