

Chapter 1: Introduction

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Wisconsin has a diverse multimodal transportation system that supports the state's quality of life and economic growth. Rail is a critical component to the state's entire transportation network. Significant changes have taken place with regard to rail and continue to impact how the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) and other rail stakeholders respond. With projected increases in the state's population and steady growth in traffic congestion – particularly for truck traffic freight, passenger and commuter rail will become even more vital to the state's transportation system.

The *Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030*, the state's 20 year rail plan, identifies future rail network issues and plan recommendations. It provides the framework within which the state and related stakeholders may maintain, improve and plan for the state's rail network.

The plan takes a closer look at Wisconsin's rail system by focusing on the role freight, intercity passenger, and commuter rail have in the state's multimodal transportation system. The rail plan discusses how:

- A strong rail system is important for maintaining and improving the state's economic vitality
- Rail supports livable communities
- Connections between rail and other transportation modes help improve the efficiency of the state's entire transportation system

The rail plan also identifies priorities and strategies to establish a basis for future rail investments.

Because this is a modal plan, it builds on the policies and actions identified in *Connections 2030*, the state's recently completed long-range multimodal transportation plan. The *Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030* supports the state's multimodal vision for transportation:

An integrated multimodal transportation system that maximizes the safe and efficient movement of people and products throughout the state, enhancing economic productivity and the quality of Wisconsin's communities while minimizing impacts to the natural environment.

Connections 2030 established the foundation for the future of the state's transportation system. The plan emphasized the importance of:

- Safety and security
- Preserving the existing and future transportation system
- Optimizing investment in the transportation system for continued safety, enhanced mobility and efficiency
- Responding to local, regional, national and intermodal economic trends to maintain the state's economic competitiveness
- Considering environmental issues to maintain Wisconsin's quality of life

- Providing users with transportation choices

To further reflect these emphasis areas, the policies identified in *Connections 2030* were organized around seven themes:

- Preserve and maintain Wisconsin's transportation system
- Promote transportation safety
- Foster Wisconsin's economic growth
- Provide mobility and transportation choice
- Promote transportation efficiencies
- Preserve Wisconsin's quality of life
- Promote transportation security

Under each theme, WisDOT identified a series of policy statements. These policy statements are WisDOT's goals to achieve the *Connections 2030* vision for transportation. In terms of rail, *Connections 2030* identified several policies directly related to rail. These policies were:

- Partner with stakeholders to ensure that freight movements are safe and reliable and provide positive environmental and community impacts
- Ensure that freight rail remains a viable transportation mode for Wisconsin shippers
- Support development of fixed-guideway transit services
- Increase intercity travel options by improving intercity passenger rail service
- Facilitate intermodal passenger connections

Other policies included rail-related activities or support of rail-related activities. Examples of these policies include:

- Provide grant and loan assistance to Wisconsin businesses and communities
- Maintain and improve waterways critical to Wisconsin's transportation system
- Improve intercity bus service and connections
- Emphasize air quality improvement
- Enhance the security of the transportation system by reducing vulnerability

The *Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030* reaffirms the policies and actions identified in *Connections 2030*.

Wisconsin's Rail System

Wisconsin's rail history

Railroads have been an integral part of Wisconsin's transportation system and economy since 1847 when the state's first freight service was introduced. The first intercity passenger rail service in Wisconsin began in 1851, carrying travelers between Milwaukee and Waukesha. From the 1860s until the late 1920s, private railroad companies built an extensive passenger and freight service network throughout Wisconsin and connected the state with the rest of the country. By the late 1920s, every

county in the state had at least one depot. Wisconsin's railroad network peaked around 1920 with about 7,600 miles.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, government regulation, the rapid growth of truck and barge freight movement, the construction of the interstate highway system and inland waterway system, and huge losses in passenger operations led to a significant number of railroad bankruptcies and service abandonments, as well as deferred maintenance and general financial deterioration of the rail industry.

In 1970, Congress passed the Federal Rail Passenger Service Act, which created the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, commonly known as Amtrak, to operate the nation's intercity passenger rail services. Its purpose was to relieve the freight railroads from the huge losses incurred in passenger service that the railroads were required to provide.

In 1980, the Staggers Railroad Act provided widespread deregulation of the railroad industry. Prior to 1980, government regulation limited railroads' ability to adjust their rates, making it difficult for railroads to compete with other modes, particularly the trucking industry. The Act allowed railroads to adjust their rates based on market demand. The Act also allowed for easier abandonment of lines and led to significant changes among carriers as larger railroads "spun-off" their unproductive lines to newly created short-line and regional railroads. For more information see Chapter 4, Freight Rail.

Role of rail in Wisconsin

Today, Wisconsin's rail network includes approximately 3,600 miles of track. Of that total, just over 530 miles are owned by the state and leased to railroad companies. Eleven freight rail companies operate in the state. In addition, Amtrak provides intercity passenger service on two routes, and Metra provides commuter rail service between Kenosha and Chicago.

Looking ahead to 2030, WisDOT foresees rail continuing to play an important role in Wisconsin's economy for several reasons:

- Rail service provides a low cost transportation alternative for high volume, lower value commodities that are essential to many of Wisconsin's manufacturing industries.
- Rail freight movement between Wisconsin, Canada and Mexico is expected to continue to grow.
- Intercity passenger rail provides a travel option for those who cannot, or choose not to, drive or fly.
- Both rail freight and passenger service provide an energy efficient way to move goods and people.

Stakeholders/plan implementation

Unlike the state's highway and local road system, which are owned by either WisDOT or local governments, the majority of the state's rail infrastructure is privately owned and operated. As a result, decisions regarding track maintenance and operation are made by private companies based on their business needs and investment priorities. Likewise, WisDOT does not directly provide any freight, intercity passenger or commuter rail service. Instead, WisDOT's role is focused on making investment decisions that support the state's transportation network and overall growth of the economy and

supporting passenger rail services. In general, WisDOT does this by providing technical assistance relative to specific issues, and offering funding assistance limited to specific rail related needs and activities.

For these reasons, actions identified in this plan require coordination and cooperation among many different stakeholders. Since the rail industry is considered intercity commerce, the federal government has a key role in its regulation, even though the level of federal government involvement is much less today than it was prior to the Staggers Act. Below is a brief summary of some of the key stakeholders and their respective roles.

- Federal Railroad Administration – the lead federal agency concerned with the safety and performance of the nation’s freight rail, intercity passenger rail, and roadway/railway crossings.
- Federal Transit Administration – concerned with the safety and performance of commuter rail systems (a fixed-guideway transit system mode).
- Wisconsin Office of the Commissioner of Railroads (OCR) – monitors and addresses roadway/railway safety. OCR is also responsible for ensuring the proper drainage in railroad rights of way, maintaining sight clearance at crossings and regulating train crews.
- Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) – in terms of freight railroads, WisDOT administers grant programs for freight railroad improvements. WisDOT also owns track that is leased to local transit commissions. In terms of passenger rail, WisDOT and the Illinois Department of Transportation provide funding for Amtrak’s *Hiawatha* service between Milwaukee and Chicago. WisDOT has had a longstanding involvement in planning future intercity passenger rail service within the state and the region as part of the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative. WisDOT is working on the development of passenger rail service between Milwaukee and Madison, and has partnered with Minnesota to study alternative routes for service between Milwaukee and the Twin Cities. WisDOT has also provided funding for some commuter rail studies.
- Amtrak – provides intercity passenger rail service. In Wisconsin, Amtrak operates the *Hiawatha* service between Milwaukee and Chicago, and the *Empire Builder* service between Chicago and Seattle/Portland.
- Metra – regional commuter rail system that serves the greater Chicago area. Currently, Metra provides daily service between Kenosha and downtown Chicago.
- Freight railroads – own, operate and maintain the majority of track in Wisconsin.
- Local governments – are responsible for development decisions within their communities. With primary responsibility for land use planning, they are responsible for decisions such as rail stations and surrounding development, as well as enacting community level whistle-blowing laws.

Plan Organization

The *Wisconsin Rail Plan 2030* is organized into four main parts:

- Part One – Provides an overview of rail in Wisconsin, looks at rail’s role in the state’s economy, and reviews the public involvement activities that helped shape the plan.
- Part Two – Focuses on the state’s freight rail, intercity passenger rail and commuter rail networks; also discusses rail safety and security, multimodal connectivity and livability.
- Part Three – Describes the rail needs and investment program, including funding and finance options.
- Part Four – Documents the system-plan environmental evaluation and the environmental justice analysis of the potential impacts of the plan on the state’s natural, cultural and protected populations.