

RAILCET INTELLIGENCE REPORT

To: RAILCET
From: Ray Chambers
Date: August 28, 2024
Subject: **CHIPPEWA PASSENGER RAIL COMMISSION MEETING REPORT—
Summary of Meeting**

I joined the Chippewa Passenger Rail Commission meeting this morning. There was discussion about the three services that will originate from the Twin Cities Union Station. They must be reconciled in the Scoping Step of the Corridor ID (CID) projects. There will be considerable capital improvement on all three projects and around the Twin Cities Union Station area. The Commission meeting was chaired by Jim Dunning who is also on the Eau Claire County Board. The Chippewa Commission is a sponsor of the proposed Eau Claire Twin Cities Corridor. The primary topics discussed were:

Project Title: Borealis Service- Twin Cities, Milwaukee to Chicago

FRA Category: Existing Long-Distance Rail --Twin Cities, Milwaukee to Chicago (TCMC) complementing the existing long-distance Empire Builder. The Borealis expansion was recently inaugurated. It does not duplicate the Chippewa Route, but discussion took a significant part of the meeting and was led by MnDOT's Greg Mathis. Amtrak is the operator, and ridership is exceeding expectations – something like 730 riders a day in August. Amtrak and MnDOT are having difficulty agreeing on projected ridership which will impact the subsidy paid by the state. Mathis expects to have consultants under contract for further developments on the line by the end of next week. Kevin Roggenbuck of Ramsey County previewed a video on the Borealis Service. (While not discussed in the meeting Mathis is interested in the Competitive Direct Access Model approach being advanced by RAILCET and AIPRO. I have a video conference with Greg and his staff this coming Friday).

Project Title: Eau Claire-Twin Cities Corridor

FRA Category: New Conventional Rail – The Chippewa Authority Project (*Note, FRA lists the sponsoring agency for this project as Eau Claire County*)

Scott Rogers provided history on the Chippewa CID application for a Scoping Grant which was funded by FRA. He explained that a bid by HDR-HNTB to perform the CID Scoping Analysis was recommended by the commission selection committee. Both Scott and Vic Stone of UP were on the Committee. During the meeting it was voted on by the Board and unanimously approved. Rick Degman of HDR will coordinate the effort and make a presentation to the Commission. HDR HNTB has received numerous awards for the CID scoping grants. The Chippewa project will follow the overall pattern applied to all CID projects. Scott said a future issue is whether the Chippewa Commission or Wisconsin will be the lead sponsor of this project as it moves to the FRA Project Development stage.

Project Title: Milwaukee-Madison-Eau Claire-Twin Cities Passenger Rail Extension

FRA Category: New Conventional Rail connecting Milwaukee to Minneapolis through Madison and Eau Claire, Wisconsin. The route is across significant UP rights of way and the operations as across the same corridor as the Chippewa project. As a new project there must be coordination between the two in the scoping study. This project also received an FRA \$500k CID grant.

Coordination: Since Eau Claire- Twin Cities Corridor and Milwaukee to Twin Cities Corridor overlap they must be reconciled. My understanding is HDR-HNTB are doing CID scoping on both. Caroline Dobbs of HDR said coordination of these intersecting routes will be a priority. She asks for a public outreach campaign for these projects.

Twin Cities Station Issue –With three extended passenger operations coming into the Twin Cities there must be significant planning for track and other infrastructure improvements. This should be of particular interest to RAILCET. Studies are underway on anticipated train frequencies and hopefully a good estimate will be available for the project as a part of the CID Scoping. The cost should be finalized, and the funding identified in the CID Step 2 Project Development.

The Competitive Direct Access Model. The Chippewa CID application is unique in that it calls for the Competitive Direct Access Model being promoted by the rail operations and construction contractors as opposed to the Traditional Amtrak Model with its statutory preferences. It was disappointing this received no mention during the Commission discussion. However, RBC provided a series of Market Soundings for Chippewa and helped draft the application. The UP strongly supported it, labor supported it and HDR helped, pro bono, with the drafting of the Application. Going forward, a principal role of AIPRO and RAILCET will be to work closely with the UP to assure the Direct Access Model is front and center as the Eau Claire-Twin City Corridor progresses. It should also be applied to the Milwaukee-Twin Cities Corridor.