

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study Midwest Regional Working Group Meeting 2

Date: July 27, 2023, 9 am-2:45 pm ET

Location: Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), 1299 Superior Avenue E, Cleveland, OH 4414

1. Introduction

Under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA), FRA is conducting a study to evaluate the restoration of daily intercity passenger rail service along:

- any Amtrak Long-Distance routes that were discontinued; and
- any Amtrak Long-Distance routes that occur on a nondaily basis.

FRA may also evaluate potential new Amtrak Long-Distance routes, including with specific attention provided to routes in service as of April 1971 but not continued by Amtrak.

As part of this study, FRA is engaging with State Departments of Transportation, Amtrak, Class I Railroads, metropolitan planning organizations, regional passenger rail authorities, and local officials as well as transportation and rail partners, federally recognized tribes, and the broader community, as they evaluate how to better connect people with long-distance rail services.

In January and February 2023, FRA hosted the first of four rounds of regional working group meetings across the United States, in six separate regions, to engage members of the regional working groups. The second round of meetings was held in July 2023, with the Midwest regional meeting taking place on July 27. The purpose of this round of meetings was to brief regional working group members about the progress of the study, inform participants of the methodology for developing an enhanced long-distance rail network, and receive input on potential new routes and the baseline and enhanced networks.

The meeting was held both in person in Cleveland, Ohio, as well as online for virtual participants. Each regional working group meeting followed a similar agenda, which is summarized below:

- Welcome and Introductions
- Study Overview – What We’ve Heard So Far
- Baseline Network Overview
- Enhanced Network Development
- Discussion of Enhanced Network
- Comparison of Enhanced and Baseline Networks
- Route Development and Feedback
- Stakeholder Insights for Ongoing Feedback Opportunities

This summary provides both an overview of the information shared at the Midwest regional working group meeting and an overview of meeting attendee feedback and conversations that occurred throughout the day.

2. Welcome and Introductions

The Midwest regional meeting began with a welcome from the FRA study team, followed by a review of housekeeping and safety information. Next, in-person and virtual attendees introduced themselves and the FRA

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study team reviewed the meeting agenda and objectives. Regional working group participants in attendance, both in-person and virtually, are listed at the end of this summary.

Figure 1. Participants at Midwest Regional Working Group Meeting 2 on July 27 in Cleveland, Ohio



3. Study Overview and What We've Heard So Far

The FRA study team began by providing meeting attendees with an overview of the study scope and what has occurred since the first round of regional meetings. The FRA study team detailed the legislative direction for the study, which will result in a report to Congress that includes recommendations for preferred options for restoring or enhancing long-distance service, a review of funding options, estimated costs and public benefits of long-distance service enhancement or restoration, and a prioritized inventory of capital projects to restore or enhance service. The overview gave an opportunity for participants to understand the study's objectives and FRA's vision for using their feedback in the future.

Next, the FRA study team provided a summary of feedback received during the first series of the regional meetings and the comments received from the study website. The team highlighted the critical role of stakeholder input in the development of study evaluation factors and gave an overview of public comments as they pertained to geographic and service priorities.

4. Network Definitions

Next, the FRA study team shared background information about the network concepts that the study will evaluate. Four network concepts were presented: the Existing Network, the Baseline Network, the Discontinued Network, and the Enhanced Network. Development of the Enhanced Network comprised most of the working group discussion during the meeting.

The Existing Network is defined as current intercity passenger rail services, including current long-distance services, state-supported services, and Northeast Corridor services. The Baseline Network is defined as the Existing Network with the addition of several other forthcoming intercity passenger rail services. The FRA study team developed a Baseline Network solely for the purpose of comparing the near-term "current" intercity passenger rail services with the potential future Enhanced Network of long-distance services.

The FRA study team also defined the Discontinued Network as all long-distance routes that were in service as of April 1971 but were not continued by Amtrak, as well as long-distance routes that were previously operated by Amtrak but have since been discontinued.

During this presentation and throughout the meeting, questions were asked about how international routes will be considered as a part of the Long-Distance Service Study. No Amtrak long-distance routes currently cross international borders, although stakeholders in several regional working group meetings have suggested possible service locations in Canada and Mexico. Although the Long-Distance Service Study is focused on long-distance routes in the lower 48 states, the FRA study team will note stakeholder requests for international service in its final report to Congress.

5. Enhanced Network Development

The FRA study team defined the Enhanced Network as the expanded and interconnected passenger rail network for rail service and expansion. The Enhanced Network is comprised of the Baseline Network, portions of the Discontinued Network, plus new segments where long-distance passenger rail service has not previously operated.

The Enhanced Network is not routes; it is comprised of conceptual segments between Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) that can inform future route development.

After defining the different networks, the FRA study team presented the four IIJA considerations used to guide the development of an Enhanced Network, taking into consideration how the network could:

- link and serve large and small communities as part of a regional rail network
- advance the economic and social well-being of rural areas of the United States
- provide enhanced connectivity for the national long-distance passenger rail system
- reflect public engagement and local and regional support for restored passenger rail service

The FRA study team then showed meeting attendees the four-step process used to create an Enhanced Network with conceptual segments for future route development consideration. Step 1 included reviewing travel flows by all modes (travel by car, plane, bus, and rail) to show market demand between metropolitan areas not served directly by rail in the Existing Network. The FRA study team used Federal Highway Administration NextGen data for this analysis. Step 2 addressed rural accessibility, including an evaluation of access to rural counties, tribal lands, and USDOT Justice40 disadvantaged communities. Step 3 addressed geographic coverage/network connectivity and reviewed passenger rail service by state, as well as regional rail plans, to provide enhanced network connectivity for long-distance passenger rail. And finally, Step 4 addressed stakeholder input and highlighted where stakeholders were most interested in seeing service enhancements.

Based on the four-step process described above, the FRA study team presented Midwest region meeting attendees with potential segments that could be used as part of the Enhanced Network. More detailed regional conceptual maps were also shared to further show how new segments could be added in the Midwest region.

Detailed Enhanced Network maps are available in the [presentation](#).

6. Discussion of Enhanced Network

The presentation of the Enhanced Network concept prompted questions and comments from Midwest region meeting attendees.

One meeting attendee that many of the potential segments do not pass through large areas that include tribal land and disadvantaged rural locations. The attendee asked whether these areas are being addressed in the Long-Distance Service Study, and whether they are factoring in historically disadvantaged populations when making location decisions, specifically in places like South Dakota. The FRA study team responded that rural access and disadvantaged communities were considered in Step 2 of the Enhanced Network development, but there are

some limitations to rural access due to the availability of the North American Rail Network in some parts of the country. Another participant noted that, in South Dakota, there is existing rail that could potentially accommodate a passenger route between Sioux Falls, Rapid City, and Denver. This participant said they would send information on this to the FRA study team. An Amtrak staff member confirmed that rail does exist in South Dakota in this location, and could potentially be utilized in the future to serve cities in the Midwest that are experiencing population and economic growth.

An Amtrak staff member also brought attention to a discontinued route segment that connected Kansas City, St. Louis, and New Orleans, via Centralia, which is not technically long-distance but had previously been a segment of the longer route. The staff member encouraged the FRA study team to consider segments that are not long-distance but have been part of discontinued long-distance routes. The FRA study team noted that they would consider this, and that this segment was reviewed as part of the discontinued routes during the first round of regional working group meetings.

A meeting attendee asked about the process for National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) review for long-distance service, and what the timeframe is for the NEPA review process. The FRA study team responded that the Long-Distance Service Study is in the early stages of the FRA project lifecycle process, and does not include NEPA or environmental planning decisions. Environmental planning work on individual routes or projects would be done after this study is complete.

Another meeting attendee noted concern regarding potential capital investment in upgrades when only daily service will be provided, instead of higher-frequency service. They said that service multiple times a day would allow for a better transfer system. An Amtrak staff member commented that there are locations that may not be on the Long-Distance Service Study Enhanced Network that could still be connected to the overall rail system by utilizing intermodal connections like feeder buses.

One attendee asked the FRA study team about engagement with tribal governments. The FRA study team answered that the study team mailed and emailed letters to over 350 Tribes and has also participated in several other Tribal engagement opportunities – but that the FRA study team welcomes additional input on opportunities to engage with Tribes. Another attendee raised a concern that states with more limited rail advocacy may provide less input into route development. The FRA study team responded that the study team is actively seeking stakeholder assistance in engaging with their respective communities and constituencies to help share information about the study. Another attendee followed this by saying that there may be hesitation in certain communities that have lost service to engage heavily with Amtrak or FRA, and that it is still important to advocate so that they have access to critical transportation connections.

7. Comparison of Enhanced and Baseline Networks

The next portion of the meeting focused on comparing the concept of the Enhanced Network to the Baseline Network to show the benefits of an Enhanced Network.

During the first round of regional working group meetings in January and February 2023, meeting attendees identified potential evaluation factors for the FRA study team to use to guide development of new or restored long-distance service. Based on this feedback, the FRA study team developed the following goals and objectives, with associated measures of effectiveness to evaluate the Enhanced Network.

- Connectivity
 - Increase passenger access to the national passenger rail network
 - Improve passenger rail geographic coverage
- Large and Small Communities
 - Increase long-distance passenger rail connections to small communities
- Economic and Social Well-Being of Rural Areas
 - Enhance access for historically disadvantaged populations
 - Enhance access for tribal areas
 - Enhance rural access to services

The FRA study team presented the measures of effectiveness results comparing the Baseline Network and Enhanced Network. Detailed information pertaining to each evaluation measure is available in the [presentation](#).

Several meeting attendees, as well as an Amtrak staff member, discussed the size of rural catchment areas, and shared thoughts about whether certain rural locations can be considered “in service” if the rail is too far from the community. Some shared that they felt it was too conservative to define a catchment area to be under 50 miles when some people in rural communities are willing to drive farther for passenger rail service.

8. Route Development and Feedback (Interactive Exercises 1 and 2)

The FRA study team sought discussion and ideas from meeting attendees on future long-distance route development via several interactive activities. This portion of the meeting used an interactive digital tool (Mural) to capture ideas and help participants visualize each other’s ideas.

During the first exercise, meeting attendees used sticky notes and a digital map of the Enhanced Network segments to create new long-distance routes. One meeting attendee drew a potential new route connecting Chicago, Fort Wayne, Columbus, Pittsburgh, and then on to Philadelphia and points north and south. Another meeting attendee advocated for a route connecting Louisville, Indianapolis, and Chicago. A meeting attendee, advocating for discussion about Minnesota rail, cited an analysis that found that major traffic patterns in Minnesota are west and south of the Twin Cities.

One attendee commented that it is important to keep in mind that certain long-distance discontinued routes do not need to be completely restored, and that the study should allow for smart decisions about which specific segments are brought back into service. Two stakeholders pointed out that the Rapid City area and the greater Interstate-90 corridor are in need of passenger rail due to major travel flows.

An attendee advocated for a route bisecting the state of Kentucky, due to multiple universities and horse races that draw in traffic.

The second Mural interactive activity allowed meeting attendees to draw potential new long-distance routes directly on to a digital map. During this activity, one meeting attendee noted that several new hubs were appearing on the digital interactive activity map as meeting attendees drew desired routes. The FRA study team noted that some of these potential hubs, based on the digital interactive activity map, include Cincinnati, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Atlanta, and Dallas.

A meeting attendee, as well as an Amtrak staff member, mentioned the importance of including the high interest in international service. Although the IIJA does not directly ask the FRA to study international routes, the FRA study team responded that they will be including references to international service in the final report to Congress.

Results of the interactive activities are available on the [project website](#).

9. Stakeholder Insights for Ongoing Feedback Opportunities (Interactive Exercises 3 and 4)

Section 22214 of the IIJA requires FRA to develop recommendations for methods by which Amtrak could work with local communities and organizations to develop activities and programs to continuously improve public use of intercity passenger rail service along each route.

The last two interactive activities of the day were designed to give meeting attendees an opportunity to discuss ideas and insights for future engagement and ongoing long-distance service feedback that FRA and Amtrak can use in the future.

In the third interactive activity, meeting attendees were asked to consider how Amtrak and FRA could best coordinate with stakeholders about long-distance service. Meeting participants were asked to consider both current service and future service, what type of stakeholder input is most essential, and who/what groups should be involved in providing that input. Then they provided ideas for discussion on digital sticky notes via the interactive Mural tool.

Meeting attendee ideas for further outreach opportunities included more direct outreach with smaller communities and their governments, and to engage specifically with stakeholders when determining scheduling and ideal times for passenger service. One meeting attendee advocated for better connections and collaboration between air, highway, and rail systems so that a multimodal transportation network becomes possible.

Another meeting attendee noted the importance of engagement with host railroads and also spoke about the potential for state DOTs to be facilitators of engagement between FRA, Amtrak, and host rail companies. Another attendee said that streamlining engagement programs is important, especially to small communities, for long-term planning projects that take multiple decades to deliver to the public.

For the final exercise, meeting attendees were asked to share examples of organizations or coordinating groups that have worked well for efforts with similar goals as the Long-Distance Service Study. Examples of model organizations provided by meeting attendees included the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC), Southern Rail Commission, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), and the Greater Northwest Passenger Rail Working Group. Multiple attendees, including an Amtrak staff member, commented on the difficulties of coordinating engagement and collaboration across state lines and recommended that time and thorough engagement between states be included in future decision-making about passenger rail.

Results of the interactive activities are available on the [project website](#).

10. Conclusion

The Midwest regional working group meeting concluded with a look ahead at the future of the Long-Distance Service Study, which will include two more rounds of working group meetings. The FRA study team outlined study next steps, including confirming and adapting the Enhanced Network based on stakeholder feedback, developing potential routes, and planning future meetings. Future rounds of regional working group meetings will include cost and benefit reviews, route prioritization review, and recommendation/strategy review.

Attendees

- All Aboard Minnesota
- All Aboard Northwest
- Amtrak
- Bismarck-Mandan Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning
- City of Indianapolis – Department of Metropolitan Development
- Corridor Rail Development
- Fargo-Moorhead Council of Governments
- Grand Forks-East Grand Forks Metropolitan Planning Organization
- High Speed Rail Alliance
- Illinois Department of Transportation
- Indiana Department of Transportation
- Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Iowa Department of Transportation
- Kentuckiana Regional Planning & Development Agency
- Kentucky Transportation Cabinet
- Louisville Metro Government
- Metropolitan Area Planning Agency
- Mid-America Regional Council
- Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission
- Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission
- Minnesota Department of Transportation
- Missouri Department of Transportation
- Nebraska Department of Transportation
- North Dakota Department of Transportation
- Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency
- Ohio Rail Development Commission
- Rail Passengers Association
- South Dakota Department of Transportation
- Southeast Michigan Council of Governments
- Wisconsin Department of Transportation