

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study Midwest Regional Working Group Meeting 4

Date: June 5, 2024, 9 am - 3 pm CDT

Location: Union Depot St. Paul – 214 4th Street East, St. Paul, MN 55101

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 the study, FRA is engaging with State Departments of Transportation (DOTs), Amtrak, Class I Railroads, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), regional passenger rail authorities, and local officials and listening to stakeholders, including transportation and rail partners, federally recognized tribes, and the broader stakeholder community, as we evaluate how to better connect people with long-distance rail services.

Previously, FRA hosted three rounds of regional working group meetings across the United States, in six separate regions, to engage these stakeholders. The fourth and final round of meetings were held in June 2024, with the Midwest regional meeting taking place on June 5. The purpose of this round of meetings was to review and discuss analyses associated with each of the preferred routes, including conceptual service schedules, high-level capital and operating and maintenance (O&M) cost estimate ranges, and public benefits analysis. Additionally, the meetings aimed to create a shared understanding of next steps for the study.

The meeting was held both in person in St. Paul, Minnesota, 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 and What We've Heard
- Network Development and Methods and Tools for Network Assessment
- Preferred Route Analysis
- Prioritization
- Ongoing Long-Distance Collaboration and Planning
- Conclusion

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 working group meeting began with a review of housekeeping and safety information. Next, in-person and virtual attendees introduced themselves. Regional working group members in attendance, both in-person and virtually, are listed at the end of this summary. FRA then delivered opening remarks, which provided attendees with an orientation toward the day's presentation and discussions. Amtrak also provided opening remarks.

Figure 1. Attendees at the Midwest Regional Working Group Meeting 4 on June 5 in St. Paul, Minnesota



3. Study Overview & What We've Heard

The study team began by providing meeting attendees with the legislative direction for the study, including requirements for a report to Congress, as well as an overview of current long-distance service and intercity passenger rail funding programs, and the overall study scope and approach.

The study team also reviewed feedback received during and after the third round of regional working group meetings in February 2024. Between February 6 and March 11, 2024, more than 47,000 public and stakeholder comments were received – primarily via the study website and email address. Artificial intelligence (AI) was used to analyze the comments and identify preferred routes and geographies (cities, states) mentioned.

Key stakeholder and public comment takeaways:

- 99% of comments were supportive of long-distance passenger rail in the United States
- 23% of comments simply offered support for passenger rail
- Some cities that are not included on a preferred route generated many comments and support for consideration (these cities were discussed later in the presentation)

Further information pertaining to stakeholder and public feedback may be viewed in the working group presentation on the project website – www.fralongdistancerailstudy.org/meeting-materials.

An attendee asked if stakeholder comments were read by the study team, rather than a computer. The study team clarified that they had reviewed stakeholder comments separately. Another attendee asked if the study team analyzed the negative comments received. A member of the study team answered that some of the negative comments reviewed either focused on cost or were not very specific. The study team was still in the process of reviewing comments.

An attendee pointed out that on the map of public comments it appeared that Chicago was mentioned frequently. The study team noted that among cities Chicago was mentioned the most and is currently a hub

for the majority of existing long-distance services. Significant feedback was also received about the Detroit - New Orleans route. In other regions, much of the focus was on cities that were not included on the preferred route map, and ways that they could be connected.

4. Network Development & Methods and Tools for Network Assessment

The study team gave an overview of the approach to developing the preferred routes. This began with a review of the existing passenger rail network, as well as the baseline network identified for the study. Next, the study team reviewed the conceptual enhanced network (presented in-depth at regional working group meetings in July 2023), as well as the preferred routes developed from the conceptual enhanced network (first presented at regional working group meetings in February 2024). Daily Cardinal and Sunset Limited passenger rail service was assumed when identifying the preferred routes.

The study team then reviewed the methodology and tools used to evaluate the preferred routes, including the development of conceptual service schedules, network analysis, cost estimates for O&M costs and selected passenger-service required projects, and public benefits analysis.

An attendee asked why no changes were made to the preferred routes based on the comments received following the third series of working group meetings. A member of the study team responded that the preferred routes represent an early step in the planning process and is not a final proposal for service.

An attendee asked whether the travel time improvements used the long-distance network, or if state-supported services were also included. A member of the study team replied that the focus was on station pairs on the existing network that are also included in the preferred network; calculations compared travel time on the existing network today against the preferred routes.

An attendee asked if the national average speed of 48 miles per hour was used for all the origin-destination (OD) pair estimates. The study team said the speed was consistent. Another attendee added that a national average speed of 48 miles per hour might seem low because—according to the attendee—in fiscal year 2022 none of the 15 Amtrak long-distance routes met the 80 percent standard for customer on-time performance. A member of the study team clarified that the average speed was based on existing long-distance schedules, not actual speed.

An attendee asked if the study team could address connecting the Heartland Flyer gap between Newton, Kansas, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Another attendee added that there should be a long-distance route connecting the Heartland Flyer gap. A member of the study team replied that the Heartland Flyer extension is in the Corridor ID program, which would provide opportunities to address some of these connections, and that Corridor ID, Thruway service, and other options could help fill gaps in service, with long-distance service as the backbone. A route option with a connection between Newton, Kansas, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma was evaluated for the San Antonio - Minneapolis/St. Paul preferred route but was not selected after considering the evaluation criteria. This route option could be re-evaluated in the future as part of a separate study.

An attendee asked why the catchment area for urban areas was only 30 miles. The study team said they looked closely at Amtrak data of existing customers to determine the size of the catchment area, and that this catchment area captured a high percentage of existing customers.

5. Preferred Route Analysis

The study team presented the results of the preferred routes analysis, starting with an overview of increasing the Cardinal and Sunset Limited to daily service. The study team then reviewed the results of conceptual service schedules, cost estimates, and public benefits analysis for each preferred route. These results were organized into

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a conceptual service overview; a review of equity and accessibility; a review of cost estimate ranges; and a review of safety, jobs, and earnings.

After reviewing the conceptual service schedule for the Chicago – Miami preferred route analysis, an attendee asked why the northbound train arrived in Chicago, Illinois after all the Western transcontinental trains left. The study team responded that they wanted to prioritize daytime departures from the terminals and maximize daytime service for the highest demand market pairs –and minimize nighttime service for existing long-distance routes with stations that only had nighttime service.

During the presentation of the Phoenix – Minneapolis/St. Paul preferred route analysis, an attendee suggested the route should end in Tucson, not Phoenix, Arizona.

During the presentation of the Dallas/Ft. Worth – New York preferred route analysis, an attendee asked if the study team calculated potential ridership, since the vehicle miles travelled reductions were estimated. The study team responded that high-level demand between metropolitan areas was primarily used as inputs for other analyses, including the public benefits analysis.

Another attendee asked if there was comparative analysis done to assess a route option through Oklahoma City, Wichita, Kansas, and Newton, Kansas. A study team member responded that the route selected was the best when considering all route options across multiple evaluation criteria. A route option connecting Newton, Kansas, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma was evaluated for the San Antonio - Minneapolis/St. Paul preferred route but was not selected for long-distance service considering the evaluation criteria.

During the presentation of the Denver – Houston preferred route analysis, one attendee noted that the connection in Trinidad, Colorado, would be important for anyone traveling on the Southwest Chief from Los Angeles, California to Albuquerque, New Mexico to get to one of the Front Range cities and mentioned the importance of ensuring the schedules are timed appropriately to facilitate connections. Another attendee asked what analysis had been done to understand how far passengers were willing to travel to connect to long-distance trains. A member of the study team responded that they had not done specific research on that, but that they had looked at travel demand data, and that according to Amtrak ridership data from FY 2019, 20 percent of long-distance riders transferred to another Amtrak service.

After presenting analyses of each preferred route the study team gave an overview of the potential network hubs that could be developed if the complete network was implemented. An attendee asked if the study team analyzed Kansas City, Missouri and Indianapolis, Indiana as network hubs. A member of the study team replied that it was possible Kansas City, Missouri and Indianapolis, Indiana did not meet the required threshold of 100 direct connections. Another attendee the analysis of the traffic-generating potential of any given new route was understated and there could be significant ridership growth. Another attendee asked whether the study team could conduct further analysis on enhanced connectivity that did not include only end points. The study team said it had done some of this work already and that it could be a helpful exercise. Another attendee seconded this point and added that improved connectivity at intermediate points should not be ignored.

Then, the study team identified cities not included on a preferred route that generated many comments after the last round of regional working group meetings in February 2024, and noted the opportunities and challenges of adding new markets to the preferred network. For the Midwest region, these markets included Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Cleveland, Ohio.

An attendee asked how the study team defined Columbus, Ohio and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as they were not aware of any direct rail connection between the two downtown areas where the current stations are located. A member of the study team responded that they used the North American Rail Network (NARN) to make connections. Ft. Wayne, Indiana is part of a Corridor ID proposal to go from Chicago, Illinois to Ft. Wayne, Indiana, Columbus, Ohio and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The same attendee asked how the Cleveland/Columbus, Ohio segment was dropped from the next step of building corridors. A member of the study team replied that legislative considerations for the Study drove route development: metropolitan area travel flows, rural accessibility, geographic coverage and network connectivity, and stakeholder input and discontinued routes. They added that a route option connecting

Columbus, Ohio and Cleveland, Ohio was evaluated for the Dallas/Fort Worth – New York preferred route but was not selected for long-distance service considering the evaluation criteria. The same attendee asked whether the study team was using Corridor ID to justify or eliminate routes. The study team responded that they had not done that—and that Corridor ID selections were made after this analysis had begun. They also noted the challenge of balancing adding preferred routes to areas without passenger rail service versus areas that do have long-distance service, but are served at inconvenient times. An attendee mentioned that in some instances, Amtrak service is so poor that it is a disincentive in Ohio. An attendee noted disappointment that engagement from people in Cleveland didn't result in Cleveland being added as part of the Detroit – New Orleans route.

An attendee proposed incorporating alternative preferred routes through Mankato, Minnesota, and Willmar, Minnesota, two communities that do not have passenger rail service, into the preferred route network (instead of having both the Minneapolis/St. Paul – Denver and Minneapolis – Phoenix routes follow the same segment to Sioux Falls). A member of the study team replied that the final report would recognize some of these challenges and note that the preferred routes are not final—more feedback and engagement with host railroads and other entities impacted by preferred routes would be needed, after this study is complete, to determine actual alignments of the preferred routes. They noted that this study is about establishing options, not making final decisions about alignments. One attendee emphasized that the final map will be the defining assumption for any future study.

Results of the preferred route analyses are available in the [presentation](#).

6. Prioritization

Next, the study team presented on the methodology to prioritize the preferred routes. This early, initial assessment of the preferred routes was based on three evaluation categories: complexity, benefits, and selected costs. The study team gave an overview of the various metrics evaluated for the study, and how they were weighted. Daily Cardinal, daily Sunset Limited, and Seattle – Chicago routes were not included in prioritization because they are included in FRA's [Corridor ID Program](#). The study team noted the results of this prioritization exercise may provide guidance on future priorities regarding the next phase of project planning, but that these initial ratings do not reflect prioritization for implementation funding.

An attendee asked if the study team provided any weight to rural communities that do not have other modes of travel available. The study team replied that communities without existing access to other modes of travel were considered in the prioritization metrics, but they were not given extra weight compared to other metrics in the same category.

An attendee noted that, when looking at network effect and connectivity in the prioritization methodology, enhanced travel opportunities were excluded when a proposed new route intersected with other existing routes. A member of the study team responded that in the analysis for network effect, the number of times a new route intersected with an existing station or segment was included. The study team explained that the network effect criteria considered the benefit of having shared infrastructure (stations and routes). The number of stations and route miles that the preferred routes shared with existing service were counted to see where passengers could have more connections. However, stations that were bigger hubs did not receive additional credit.

After presenting prioritization, the study team gave an overview of the FRA project lifecycle and program framework as a reminder of the steps involved in developing and implementing railroad capital projects. The study is a systems planning effort that would help to inform and initiate project planning requirements. The study team emphasized that significantly more project planning would be necessary to advance recommendations from the study.

An attendee asked if the Sunset Limited's route east of New Orleans would be restored. A member of the study team clarified that the specific route would not be restored, but the Dallas – Miami preferred route included that same discontinued segment.

Next, the study team presented implementation considerations, including key considerations for implementing the preferred routes. These considerations include:

- Funding and preparation of a service development plan
- Industry capacity to plan and implement a new long-distance route
- Coordinating and agreement with the host railroads and passenger rail service operators
- Funding and acquisition of fleet
- Funding for construction
- Sustained funding for operations

The study team presented key project planning tasks that would need to occur after the study is finalized, as part of a service development plan process. The team emphasized that the study is a very early step in the process of planning, developing, and implementing an expanded long-distance rail network.

An attendee mentioned that existing track conditions and potential necessary upgrades were not considered, which are critical from South Dakota's perspective. The study team responded that for capital costs, they assumed that existing rail infrastructure would need to be Track Class 4 and include PTC. The study team added that the capital cost estimates for improving track to support passenger rail service in South Dakota were higher because of the assessment of the existing track, which identified that much of the existing track requires upgrades to Track Class 4.

Another attendee added that considering daily service for the Sunset Limited and Cardinal was not the only challenge of those services and suggested that the schedules and stations of these services be adjusted. The same attendee mentioned the Sunset Limited should be rerouted from El Paso, Texas through Dallas, Texas and down to Houston, Texas. The attendee also mentioned one of the problems with the Cardinal is that it arrives in Cincinnati at 3:00 am. A member of the study team replied that the study did not consider enhancements or changes to existing long-distance routes, and that Corridor ID provides opportunities to look at operational improvements and cost efficiencies for some of those services.

7. Ongoing Long-Distance Collaboration and Planning

Next, FRA presented opportunities and ideas for ongoing long-distance collaboration and planning, including ideas for a new Long-Distance Public Committee, as well as a high-level, recurring long-distance planning process that could be similar to State Rail Plans or other comparable transportation investment plans.

An attendee felt the discussion should revolve around two separate advisory groups. One group could comment on the existing Amtrak service and leverage marketing, while the other could focus on collaboration on the prioritization of routes. Another attendee added that more partnerships among FRA, Amtrak, and states to develop routes would be beneficial.

An attendee suggested creating a commission of stakeholders, advocacy groups, DOTs, and MPOs with oversight to ensure the study is implemented.

Another attendee added that there is no entity that can implement the preferred routes. Another attendee mentioned that not all states have rail programs that are equally well-structured or funded and that a committee with a national scale is needed for a national effort.

During discussion of ongoing planning, an attendee suggested the process should be similar to state rail plans, involve significant stakeholder engagement, and define the federal role in long-distance service. The same attendee advocated to change the federal law requiring states to pay for any route under 750 miles. Another attendee suggested that planning efforts become a subset of a national passenger rail plan. Another attendee proposed ongoing regular planning to determine how all potential routes, long-distance or not, could work together.

An attendee asked how FRA would produce a national rail plan. A member of the study team responded that the short-term step could be enhancing regional rail planning efforts. The study team planned to acknowledge the opportunities, challenges in the final report, as well as the institutional, technical and stakeholder challenges ahead.

8. Conclusion

The regional working group meeting concluded with a review of the study's next steps. The next and final step of the study is the preparation and submittal of the report to Congress, which will happen later in 2024.

The study team noted that the study presents both opportunities and challenges for the advancement of long-distance passenger rail, which will be included as part of the report to Congress.

Attendees

- All Aboard Minnesota
- All Aboard Northwest
- Amtrak
- Corridor Rail Development Corporation
- Environmental Law and Policy Center
- High Speed Rail Alliance
- Illinois Department of Transportation
- Iowa Department of Transportation
- Louisville Metro Government
- Mid-America Regional Council
- Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission
- Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission
- Missouri Department of Transportation
- Minnesota Department of Transportation
- Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency
- Ohio Rail Development Commission
- Rail Passengers Association
- South Dakota Department of Transportation
- United Rail Passenger Alliance
- Wisconsin Department of Transportation