

**NEWS FROM ALL ABOARD WISCONSIN**

***January, 2016***

***Happy New Year!!***

***From the Officers and Board Members of All Aboard Wisconsin.***

**Rail News Comes “Fast and Furious” as Old Year Ends and New One Begins!** The last month of 2015 and the first week of the New Year saw a number of interesting and important stories regarding the railroad industry in general, and passenger rail in particular; including events underway in Wisconsin and the Midwest. The stories below are condensed and summarized from various sources:

**Wisconsin Rail News:**

**Governor Appoints New Commissioner of Railroads:** CommissionerYash Wadhwa was appointed by Governor Scott Walker to fill the position of Railroad Commissioner for the State of Wisconsin on January 5, following the resignation of the previous Commissoner, Jeff Plale. Under fire for alleged mishandling of a disciplinary issue involving misconduct by two Railroad Commission employees, Plale resigned effective January 4, 2016. Wadhwa, a civil, environmental and consulting engineer from the Milwaukee area, is a past Board Member of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, and past President of the Wisconsin Association of Consulting Engineers and the Wisconsin Society of Professional Engineers. The primary function of the Railroad Commissioner is the review and approval of road-rail grade crossing issues and modifications. In addition to his professional pursuits, Wadhwa has long been involved in Republican Party politics in the Milwaukee area, has been a supporter of the Governor, and ran unsuccessfully for the Assembly in 2008. As Railroad Commissioner, he will serve a six year term.

**WisDOT Announces $31 Million in Freight Rail** **Improvement Grants and Loans:** Continuing over 20 years of support for infrastructure improvements to Wisconsin’s freight rail industry, local communities and businesses that rely on rail service; the Wisconsin DOT recently announced the distribution of $24 Million in grants and over $7 Million in loans through two complimentary programs to upgrade freight rail lines throughout the state. Work primarily consists of infrastructure replacement and upgrades to roadbed, bridges, track, turnouts, grade crossings and signaling. Grants typically cover 80% of the project cost, with municipalities, Rail Transit Commissions, private businesses and rail operators making-up the difference. Preservation and upgrades to this freight rail infrastructure not only improve and facilitate the transport of freight – particularly bulk commodities - by rail, contributing significantly to business growth, they also improve the efficiency and safety of existing rail freight operations, while allowing train speeds to be raised and heavier 286,000 lb cars to be accommodated. While not a current goal of the program, it also preserves and improves this infrastructure for possible future passenger rail use. With the improvements funded by these programs, potential use of these facilities for passenger rail becomes more feasible with the infrastructure upgrades provided.

**Senate Bill 251 Corrects Terms of Wisconsin Members of the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission:** Wisconsin is a participating member of the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission, a multi-state body comprised of legislators from seven Midwestern states; with each state appointing two members, one from each house of its legislature. The Midwest Regional Passenger Rail Compact, the legal document which established the Commission, and to which Wisconsin is a signatory, states that the terms of the members of the commission shall be …”two years, or until successors are appointed…”. Up until now, however, Wisconsin law has not included the specific language maintaining a legislator’s membership on the commission beyond the basic two year term to include that time beyond two years until the presiding officer of the house to which the legislator belongs appoints a successor. Senate Bill 251 corrects that deficiency in Wisconsin law.

Current Wisconsin representatives on the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission are State Senator Mark Miller (D-Monona), who has served on the Commission for some time; and State Representative Ed Brooks, (R-Reedsburg) who was newly appointed to the Commission this past spring. Both Senator Miller and Representative Brooks have attended AAW events and updated us on their activities over the past two years.

**Amtrak in the News at Years’ End:** Several items, both positive and negative, surfaced in the news in late December and early January regarding Amtrak:

**Amtrak Rolls-Out PTC on New York-Philadelphia Portion of NEC:**  Over the weekend of December 19-20, Amtrak activated it’s “Advanced Civil Speed Enforcement System” (ACSES) which functions as its version of “Positive Train Control” (PTC) on the portion of the Northeast Corridor between New York and Philadelphia. Amtrak officials announcing the activation downplayed it’s importance, calling it “…an added layer of safety…”. However, pressure on the railroad to implement the technology was great following the multiple fatality derailment and wreck of Amtrak Train 188 in Philadelphia earlier in the year; an event that was blamed on the failure of the train’s engineer to observe track speed limits in the area, and which many have suggested might have been prevented had PTC been in operation.

**Surface Transportation Board to Define Amtrak On-Time Performance, Establish Grievance Process:**  On December 28, the Surface Transportation Board (STB) issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking defining what constitutes “on time performance” for passenger rail services. The NPRM responds to Section 213 of the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 which established a complaint process which can be invoked if the on-time performance of any intercity passenger train falls below 80% for any two consecutive calendar quarters. Under the proposed rule, the Board may initiate an investigation on its own, or other eligible complainants, including Amtrak, may file a complaint with the Board, requesting a review. Under the NPRM, “on time” would be defined as the train arriving at it’s final terminus no more than 5 minutes after its scheduled arrival time for each 100 miles that the train operated (i.e. 15 minutes for a train that had travelled 300 miles, etc.) , or 30 minutes after its scheduled arrival time, whichever is less. At the same time, the STB issued a proposed policy statement addressing the presentation of issues that might arise in a complaint regarding insufficient on-time performance; and specifically the statutory preference accorded to Amtrak trains over freight trains. More information is available on the STB site, [www.stb.dot.gov](http://www.stb.dot.gov).

**The Bad News – Empire Builder Performance Hurting at Year’s End:** The Amtrak “Empire Builder”, the only passenger train providing service to most of Wisconsin as well as Minnesota, saw a 3% ridership decrease and a $4 Million loss of operating revenue for Fiscal Year 2015 compared to the previous year. A total of 438,000 passengers, generating $50.5 Million in revenue, rode the “Builder” in FY 2015. While Wisconsin ridership figures were not immediately available, Minnesota ridership dropped to 136,000, with boardings in St. Paul falling to just 90,000. The bulk of the blame for the ridership and revenue loss is attributed to the train’s poor schedule-keeping, particularly on the eastbound leg of its journey.

Interestingly, many comments to the article on the “Trains News Wire” site called for one or more additional trains on the Chicago-Twin Cities leg of the journey – something that is being addressed by the joint Wisconsin-Minnesota “Second Train Study”, which is now entering it’s second phase. The “second train” would operate opposite the current Empire Builder, with a morning departure from Chicago and an afternoon return from St. Paul. Wisconsin and Minnesota rail planners are currently working on the environmental portion of the study, followed by an assessment of the infrastructure upgrades required to support the expanded service.

**The Good News-Southwest Chief and California Zephyr Ridership Trends Upward:** Amtrak’s other two Midwest-Far West long distance trains had better news to report for FY 2015. The Southwest Chief, once in danger of nullification for a variety of reasons, reported a 4.3% ridership increase and a 0.6% operating revenue increase for the last fiscal year; returning totals of 367,267 passengers and just under $45 Million in revenue. Following an outpouring of support and funding from cities and towns along the route in Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico, who raised $50 Million toward track upgrade costs; a $15 million federal grant, and cooperation from track owner BNSF Railway, performance of the train has turned around. The other long distance train, the California Zephyr, saw a 2.4% ridership increase, with 372,342 passengers boarding in FY 15; although operating revenues suffered a 0.9% decrease to $48.7 million.

**Elsewhere in Rail News:**

**“Operation Lifesaver” Names New CEO:** Bonnie Murphy, former General Manager of Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority’s rail operations and Trinity Railway Express in Dallas-Ft. Worth, TX; has been announced as the new CEO of “Operation Lifesaver”, the nationwide rail safety advocacy organization. Ms. Murphy also served for several years as a Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Regional Administrator and Deputy Administrator of FRA’s Office of Safety Compliance and program Implementation. Murphy takes over at Operation Lifesaver at a time when several high-profile grade crossing accidents and a horrific rise in fatalities from pedestrians trespassing on railroad tracks, as detailed in last month’s AAW Newsletter, has attracted national attention.

**Minnesota Moving Ahead with “Northern Lights Express”:** As those who attended the Fall Conference in Duluth learned, our neighbors in Minnesota have been planning a return of passenger rail service from the Twin Cities to Duluth, including a stop in Superior, WI, for several years; ending what has been a nearly 31 year drought for passenger rail in that market. Those attending the conference even had the opportunity to visit the location of the Duluth station for the proposed service; co-located with the city’s brand new downtown intermodal station for intercity bus and local transit service.

A combination of MnDOT and the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance plans 4 daily round trips over the line, with trains operating at up to 90 MPH. Cost of the project is expected to range from $500-$600 Million, including stations, equipment and track improvements. This estimate is down from an original estimate of almost $1 Billion as the result of a decision to lower the top speed of the service from 110 to 90 MPH. One-way travel time over the entire route is expected to be about 2.5 hours. First year ridership estimates are between 700,000 and 750,000 passenger trips, projected to increase to over 1 million passengers by 2040. Operating costs are estimated at $17.5 million annually, the majority of which is planned to be covered by fare revenue. Pending completion of planning, applications and approval of construction and grant funding by the USDOT, construction could begin as early as 2017, with revenue service beginning in 2020 if current plans hold-up.

**Here at Home: All Aboard Wisconsin Association News:**

**Did You Attend the Fall Conference?**  **Your Registration Returned Substantial Support to AAW!** The “books have been closed” on last fall’s bi-state public transportation conference in Duluth; the first one for which All Aboard Wisconsin was an official sponsor. We’re thrilled to report that as an official sponsor, our portion of the conference proceeds – the “profit” that remains after all expenses are paid - amounted to **$2,355**! This is money that goes directly to the AAW treasury to help advance our program and purposes. ***Thanks to all who participated!!*** This fall’s conference will be a Wisconsin-only affair to be held in **Green Bay on October 3-5, 2016**. Watch for more details in future newsletters!

**Speaking of Events – Mark Your Calendar for These Dates!**

* **Spring Public Transportation Day at the State Capitol: Wednesday, April 20, 2016.** This is our day to “knock on doors”, speak with our legislators and their staffs and let them know how important investment in public transportation in all modes – but in particular passenger rail – can and will be to benefit the state going forward. Watch for further details in next month’s newsletter!
* **Officers Attend APTA National Legislative Conference in Washington – March 13-16.** Similar to what we’ll be doing in Madison in April, a small group of AAW officers will attend the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) national legislative conference in Washington, DC in March. We’ll participate in the spring meeting of APTA’s national High Speed and Passenger Rail Committee, spend time becoming educated about the national issues on passenger rail and other transportation funding, meeting with other national-level rail associations, and of course, spending some time “knocking on doors” and visiting with our representatives in Washington. The profile of All Aboard Wisconsin has been greatly enhanced in the past few months. (Amazing how interested people are in us now that the Speaker of the House hails from Wisconsin…!)

**Housekeeping Details – Keeping the “Home Fires Burning” at AAW:**

* **Have You Renewed?? *Thanks so much to everyone who’s renewed their All Aboard Wisconsin memberships for 2016 so far!* Oops! What’s that you say – you forgot to renew??** Well, everybody’s busy over the holiday season, so maybe it’s just possible that our appeals last month to renew your All Aboard Wisconsin membership for 2016 got overlooked in the hustle and bustle of the season. Yes, we got a nice “payoff” from the Fall Conference**,** but “every little bit helps”– and remember your dues not only help us pay our day-to-day operating expenses, they also demonstrate our members’ support to foundations and other donors that we approach for additional funding.  **So, if you haven’t renewed your membership for 2016 yet** – **“Why Not Do It Today”?!** Just fill out the membership form that you received in the mail, and pop in your check for the level of membership you desire (please consider becoming a “Sustainer” for just $75), and mail it off to: All Aboard Wisconsin, 754 Williamson Street, Madison, WI 53703.
* **Recruiting Board Members:** Corporate Secretary Gary Goyke is still recruiting for volunteers to serve on one of All Aboard Wisconsin’s two Boards – the 501(c)(3) Board which manages the day-to-day affairs of the Association, and the 501(c)(4) Board which oversees AAW’s political activities/endorsements. Have questions? Just give Gary a call at (608) 219-5237. Then send him a letter indicating your interest and a brief resume to: All Aboard Wisconsin, 754 Williamson Street, Madison, WI 53703.