

Fact Sheet

Potential shuttle connection to Amtrak service at Tomah

April 29, 2020

What's being considered: As part of the implementation of a second train on the current Twin Cities-Milwaukee-Chicago (TCMC) Amtrak route, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) is considering the establishment of a dedicated shuttle connection from Eau Claire to the train's station at Tomah.

Background: WisDOT, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) and Amtrak have been working on starting a second train to complement the existing long-distance Empire Builder service that operates on the Canadian Pacific Railroad between St. Paul and Chicago via Winona, La Crosse, Tomah, Milwaukee and Chicago. The Empire Builder originates in Seattle and Portland, and can often run late eastbound. There is strong ridership on the Twin Cities-Chicago portion of the route, so the states have been working on establishing an additional train on a complementary schedule to add schedule options for travelers, which also would have the benefit of a more reliable schedule. Canadian Pacific has been recognized by Amtrak as being the host railroad that provides the highest level of on-time performance on its route of any railroad, well above 90%.

Dedicated shuttles: Providing connecting shuttle services to extend the reach of trains to major off-route destinations is a proven way to improve the utility and ridership on train services. In addition to the Eau Claire shuttle, WisDOT and MnDOT are also considering similar services to Madison and Rochester. Last summer, WisDOT also added twice daily bus shuttles to link its popular Chicago-Milwaukee Hiawatha trains to Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, Appleton and Green Bay. States like California and North Carolina have had success in linking state-supported Amtrak services to off-line cities.

Benefits of an Eau Claire-Tomah shuttle: A number of area citizens already utilize I-94 to drive to Tomah to take the train to Milwaukee, Chicago and other points. A shuttle would open up more travel opportunities for area residents and visitors to connect to/from Milwaukee and Chicago via Tomah, and would especially provide improved mobility for students, seniors and others who cannot or do not want to drive 80 miles to access the service. The service could utilize the planned new Transit Center in Eau Claire, providing intermodal intercity connections.

A step towards future direct passenger train service: Both the Wisconsin State Rail Plan and the Minnesota State Rail plan include the Eau Claire in long-range plans for passenger rail service. Implementation of the shuttle connection to Tomah would be a step towards, and be complementary to, the future implementation of direct passenger rail service to West Central Wisconsin.

Status of project: WisDOT, MnDOT and Amtrak have made significant progress towards developing the planned TCMC train service. Initial ridership and capital estimates have been developed. They are assembling the state funding needed for to qualify for available federal capital grant programs, and have applied to the Federal Railroad Administration for funding from its Restoration and Enhancement Grant program for startup operating costs. During 2020, they anticipate completing a Service Plan, railroad coordination and environmental clearances, then submit a federal grant application for final design and construction. Also see: <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/passengerrail/tc-mil-chi/index.html>

Other support: Locally, the Eau Claire City Council, the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce, and the West Central Wisconsin Rail Coalition have provided letters or resolutions of support for the Eau Claire shuttle and TCMC train service. WisDOT has also received expressions of support for TCMC from the cities of Columbus, Portage, Wisconsin Dells and Tomah; La Crosse County, Wisconsin Dells Visitor & Convention Bureau; Tomah Chamber of Commerce, La Crosse County Development Corporation, SE Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority, Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission, and the Great River Rail Commission.