



www.jsonline.com | [Return to regular view](#)

Original Story URL:

<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=287778>

Projected cost of high-speed trains doubles

By LARRY SANDLER

lsandler@journalsentinel.com

Posted: Dec. 27, 2004

The projected cost of a proposed Midwestern network of high-speed trains has more than doubled over the past six years, to \$7.7 billion, including about \$1.2 billion in Wisconsin alone, a new report shows.

But the federal government has yet to show any interest in putting up its \$6.2 billion share of the nine-state Midwest Regional Rail Initiative, and supporters agree the 110-mph train plan won't get out of the station without federal money.

The initiative would create a network of fast, frequent trains with a Chicago hub. In Wisconsin, the network would link Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay and other cities to Chicago and Minneapolis-St. Paul. Other routes would link Chicago to St. Louis, Detroit, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Omaha and Des Moines.

Supporters say the trains would give travelers a way to avoid crowded highways and airports while boosting economic development and jobs.

When the first cost estimates were released in 1998, the system was projected to cost \$3.47 billion, including \$849 million in Wisconsin. At that point, the nine state transportation departments were seeking \$2.78 billion in federal money to cover 80% of the costs, matched by \$690 million from the states.

While the proposed 80-20 funding ratio has held steady, the projected price tag for upgrading tracks and buying trains is up 122%, according to a recent revision of the plan.

Part of that increase reflects a decision to seek faster and more frequent service on some routes, including the Milwaukee-to-Green Bay route not currently served by Amtrak, said Randy Wade, passenger rail implementation manager for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation.

More trips, higher speed

Planners originally sought four round trips daily at 79 mph, with stops in Neenah, Appleton, Oshkosh, Fond du Lac and either Allenton or West Bend. The revised plan seeks seven round trips daily at 110

mph.

Because the Milwaukee-to-Green Bay leg would be a continuation of the existing Chicago-to-Milwaukee route, service between Milwaukee and Chicago also would rise from the originally planned 14 round trips daily to 17.

Amtrak's Hiawatha line now runs seven daily round trips at 79 mph, covering the distance in about 1 1/2 hours, with stops in Sturtevant and Glenview, Ill. The boost to 110 mph would cut the trip by about 25 minutes, the report says.

Of the 17 trains on the Chicago-to-Milwaukee route, 10 would continue to Madison, another destination not currently served by Amtrak. At 110 mph, the Milwaukee-to-Madison trip would take about an hour, with some trains stopping in Brookfield, Oconomowoc and Watertown.

Plans have long called for the Milwaukee-to-Madison route to be one of the first in the Midwest network, because of its potential to attract new riders. In June, Amtrak urged Congress to jump-start the route, predicting that extending the Hiawatha to Madison and adding more trips would more than double ridership, to 1.09 million by 2008.

Of the 10 Milwaukee-to-Madison trains, six would continue to the Twin Cities. That service would replace Amtrak's once-a-day Empire Builder, which now links Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis-St. Paul and the Pacific Northwest on a route that bypasses Madison.

Updated costs

Planners also have revised their cost estimates based on more detailed engineering work, taking into account the need to share the tracks with freight trains, Wade said.

The plan now estimates track improvements would cost \$227 million between Milwaukee and Madison; \$285 million from Milwaukee to the Illinois state line; \$243 million from Madison to La Crosse; and \$311 million from Milwaukee to Green Bay, Wade said.

New trains for the Milwaukee-to-Madison route would add another \$89 million, bringing the total cost of that route to \$316 million, with \$253 million from the federal government and \$63 million from the state, Wade said. For the rest of the Wisconsin routes, trains would cost \$152 million, but Illinois and Minnesota would share part of that cost, he said.

Although the overall plan hasn't been approved, more than \$100 million has been spent on engineering and on facilities that could improve existing service even if the full network isn't built.

For example, Sen. Herb Kohl (D-Wis.) has persuaded Congress to earmark several million dollars in recent years to upgrade rail crossings along the high-speed routes.

Wisconsin also has used a mix of state, federal and private money for the \$1.4 million purchase and \$4 million renovation of the downtown Milwaukee Amtrak station, the \$6.7 million construction of a new Amtrak station at Mitchell International Airport and the \$8 million purchase of the Watertown-to-Madison tracks.

Illinois has spent more than \$79 million to upgrade a 125-mile stretch of the Chicago-to-St. Louis route for 110-mph operation, said John Schwalbach, rail chief in the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Michigan also has invested \$40 million in upgrading part of the Chicago-to-Detroit route.

Congress, meanwhile, has declined to authorize major spending on high-speed rail while lawmakers and the White House debate Amtrak's future. A long-range transportation spending bill also stalled amid election-year pressures.

Wisconsin officials will travel to Washington, D.C., to discuss the rail issue with lawmakers in January, Wade said.

[Buy a link here](#)

From the Dec. 28, 2004 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
Have an opinion on this story? [Write a letter to the editor](#) or start an [online forum](#).

Subscribe today and receive 4 weeks free! [Sign up now](#).

© 2006, Journal Sentinel Inc. All rights reserved. | [Produced by Journal Interactive](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)
Journal Sentinel Inc. is a subsidiary of [Journal Communications](#).

