

Michigan Department of Transportation
Rail Passenger Corridor Investment Plan
2022 PA166, Section 757
September 11, 2023

Sec. 757 – Rail passenger corridor investment plan requirements. “In developing its rail passenger corridor investment plan, the department shall include both of the following: (a) An analysis of the feasibility of rail passenger service from New Buffalo, Michigan to Traverse City, Michigan. (b) Information necessary to advance a project related to the establishment and operation of rail passenger service between Ann Arbor, Michigan and Traverse City, Michigan.”

The Michigan Department of Transportation’s (MDOT’s) Office of Rail is pleased to present this report in compliance with Section 757.

Corridor Planning

Although referenced in the boilerplate, MDOT does not have a rail passenger corridor investment plan. MDOT’s planning process begins with Michigan Mobility 2045 (MM2045), which serves as the roadmap for the future of transportation in Michigan – across all modes, including rail. Through the development of MM2045, MDOT, with significant support and input from the public and a broad range of associations and business interests across the state, set a vision for transportation in Michigan. MM2045 is the state long-range transportation plan and presents the vision and objectives for existing and future transportation systems, including passenger rail. This plan identified goals and strategies to guide long-term investments for the next 25 years. Included in the plan is the Rail Service Investment Plan (RSIP), which contains projects identified by MDOT, railroads, rail interest groups, businesses, and citizens of the state of Michigan. While this list is not fiscally constrained, it does serve as the guidance document for rail infrastructure investments within the state. Throughout MM2045’s development and public outreach, a passenger rail service connecting New Buffalo and Traverse City was not identified, however establishing a new passenger rail service connecting Ann Arbor and Traverse City was identified and included in the RSIP.

MDOT is open to additional routes and services that will promote passenger rail service in Michigan. In determining feasibility, MDOT looks to locally led efforts to establish potential new services. These projects are extremely costly and require time to develop. Understanding the long-term sustainability of any new route will be a key factor in determining how to move forward on additional passenger service in the future.

In 2022, the Federal Railroad Administration launched a new program – the Corridor Identification and Development (Corridor ID) Program. This serves to guide intercity passenger rail planning, development, and implementation throughout the United States and will create a pipeline of passenger rail projects ready for implementation. This program is intended to be continuous with future opportunities for corridor consideration. In the initial FY22 opportunity, MDOT prepared applications for its three existing corridors – Detroit/Pontiac-Chicago, with potential expansion to Windsor/Toronto; Port Huron-Chicago; and Grand Rapids-Chicago.

MDOT’s priority for passenger rail within the state is to improve on-time performance and reliability within the existing Amtrak corridors. Following that, MDOT is interested in scaling the implementation of additional frequencies of service within the existing corridors while monitoring market demand and performance of services to support the incremental increases.

In accordance with Section 757, MDOT presents the following conclusions on the proposed new passenger service corridors.

(a) Feasibility of New Passenger Service – New Buffalo, Michigan to Traverse City, Michigan

Currently, a direct and continuous rail route does not exist between New Buffalo and Traverse City. Upon initial study of the current rail infrastructure within the state, there are presumably three possible ways to achieve this connection. Each alternative involves considerable challenges that would need to be overcome to establish passenger rail service.

- The first alternative would be to travel along the existing Pere Marquette corridor from New Buffalo and continue north to Traverse City. This route includes significant gaps in the rail infrastructure requiring the development of new rail lines, substantial property acquisitions and significant investment. It would, however, deliver passenger rail service to lakeshore communities.
- The second alternative would be to utilize the existing Blue Water corridor from New Buffalo to Durand, then continue north on the MDOT-owned, Great Lakes Central Railroad operated line to Traverse City. This is the most straightforward route from a rail infrastructure perspective, as the rail infrastructure already exists, however travel time for this trip will be lengthy as travel distance/milage is substantially increased.
- The third alternative would utilize the existing Wolverine corridor from New Buffalo to Kalamazoo. From Kalamazoo, the service would travel north along the Grand Elk Railroad owned line to Grand Rapids, to then connect to the Marquette Rail owned line north to Manistee. At this point, a new rail infrastructure connection would be needed. This route would provide a direct connection to the Gun Lake Tribe development south of Wayland, as well as connect the larger population centers of Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids along the corridor. However, just as with the first alternative, this requires substantial property acquisitions and investment in new rail infrastructure.

To operate passenger service with any of these alternatives, significant investments will need to be made for new rail infrastructure, new stations, acquiring new equipment, Positive Train Control (PTC) installation, and improving existing rail infrastructure to meet the standards for passenger rail service. This will require extensive environmental analysis, in addition to public input and substantial community support.

Trip journey time will be slow and not competitive with automobile, air, or intercity bus travel. This is due to slow speeds on existing track and freight interference, as well as more indirect routes than traveling by automobile or bus. Travel time estimates range from 8 to 18 hours.

In conclusion, the New Buffalo-Traverse City route does not appear to be feasible due to substantial capital investments needed relative to the anticipated ridership due to lengthy trip times and the non-competitiveness of travel with other modes. Additional analysis would be warranted only with substantial community advocacy, as MDOT relies on locally led efforts to establish potential new services. Furthermore, the expansion of existing passenger rail services remains the priority for MDOT's capital investments.

(b) Advancement of New Passenger Service – Ann Arbor, Michigan to Traverse City, Michigan

The Ann Arbor-Traverse City feasibility study was led by the Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities. Most recently, the Cadillac/Wexford Transit Authority received a \$1.3 Million Federal Department of Transportation RAISE grant to fund a service development plan for the corridor. In addition, boilerplate language was included in the Labor and Economic Opportunity budget to provide a \$1 Million Michigan Infrastructure Grant to “conduct a planning and engineering and Phase II study,” which is expected to be used by the Cadillac/Wexford Transit Authority to match its RAISE grant. The service development plan should provide the information necessary to advance the potential service.