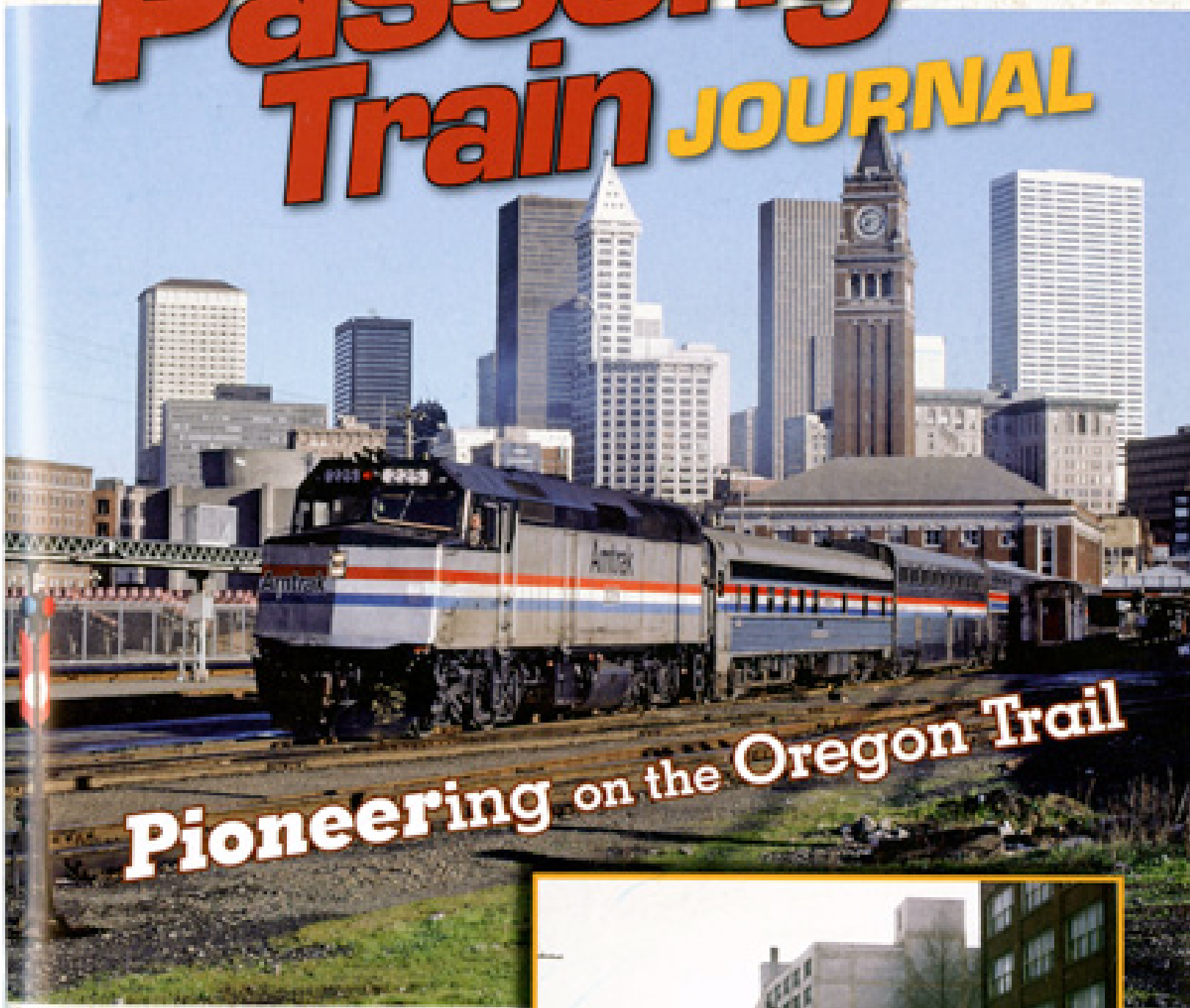


Passenger Train JOURNAL



Pioneering on the Oregon Trail

**Forgotten Corridor:
Chicago—Madison**

(But it's poised for a comeback!)



BY STEPHEN KARLSON

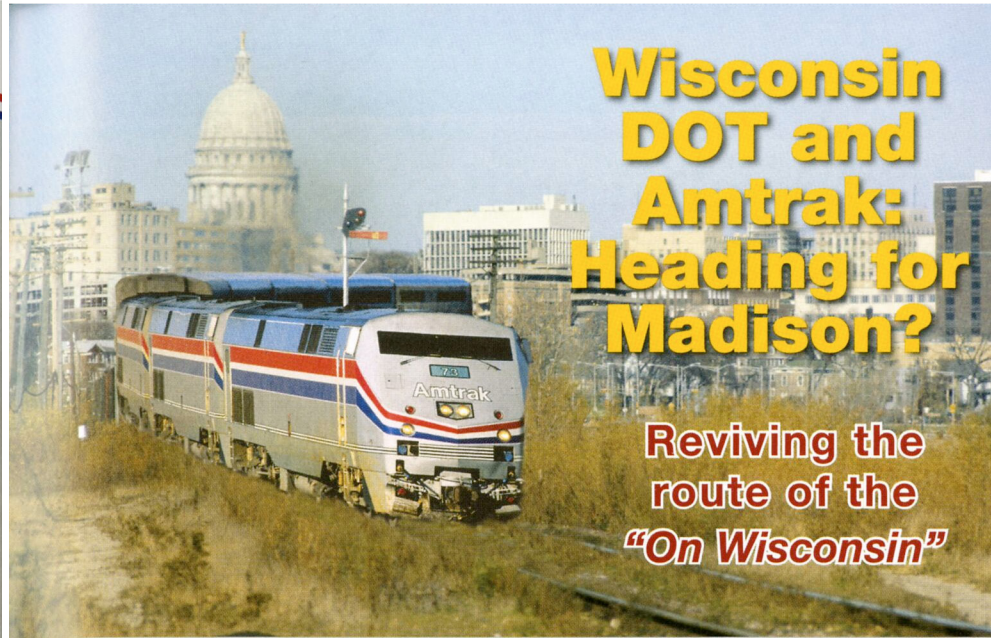
The founders of the State of Wisconsin selected two hills on an isthmus between Lakes Mendota and Monona as a particularly attractive setting for the capitol building and a state university. That 1837 decision had unanticipated consequences for the development of Wisconsin's rail network. The resulting trackage arrangement in Madison today plays into a proposed high-speed rail service between Chicago and the Twin Cities as part of the Midwest High Speed Rail Initiative.

There was a time when the Chicago-Twin Cities corridor featured the world's fastest passenger train service, with three competing carriers. And although Madison was served directly by selected through trains between Chicago and the Twin Cities (see main story), the city was not on the routes of the higher-speed Chicago-Twin Cities trains of the Burlington, North Western, nor Milwaukee Road. Rather, Madisonites had to take C&NW's *Dakota "400"* to Wyeville, Wis., and change there for the Chicago-Milwaukee-Twin Cities *Twin Cities "400"*; or they had to take a Milwaukee Road local train up to Portage, Wis., to connect with the famous *Hiawathas*—and, after the local was axed in the late 1950s, a connecting bus to Columbus, Wis. And Burlington's *Zephyr* route was nowhere even near Madison.

Madison's location and geography precluded the development of a fast route linking Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison, and the Twin Cities (see maps on page 36). The C&NW built a direct line into Madison from the southeast that bridged a lobe of Lake Monona, but then encountered several blocks of city running to the station a few blocks east of Capitol Square. The Milwaukee's direct line from Chicago also bridged that lobe, with a mid-lake interlocking with the C&NW line, and trains from Chicago via Janesville could zip right into The Milwaukee Road depot at Washington Avenue, a few more blocks from the Capitol but near the university. However, for CMSTP&P trains to travel beyond to the Twin Cities, a reverse move would have been necessary, followed by several blocks of city running.

CMSTP&P trains from Milwaukee came around the north end of Lake Monona, with extensive street- and city-running to reach Franklin Street Station (next to the C&NW depot) and ultimately Washington Avenue depot. For those trains to continue on to the Twin Cities would have required a reverse move of more than two miles to reach the Portage line to continue north. C&NW trains from Milwaukee to Madison faced a similar situation, although with a shorter backup move were they to head north out of town. These same conundrums still face planners that propose an extension of Amtrak service from Milwaukee to Madison and eventually on to the Twin Cities.

The proposed high-speed rail service will connect Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison, La Crosse, and the Twin Cities. The plan for this route has been public since early 2000. Former Wisconsin gover-



Wisconsin DOT and Amtrak: Heading for Madison?

Reviving the route of the "On Wisconsin"

nor Tommy Thompson commissioned a Blue Ribbon Task Force on Passenger Rail Service that envisioned several passenger rail projects for Wisconsin. (The report is available from the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, <http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/projects/rail.htm>.) The proposed line is part of the 2004 Midwest Regional Rail Initiative. The Federal Railroad Administration issued a Finding of No Significant [environmental] Impact for the project in August 2004, which makes the project shovel ready under the standards of the 2009 economic recovery program.

Its routing makes use of trackage that Amtrak has used to detour its *Empire Builder* (and when it ran, its *North Coast Hiawatha*) around flooding in the Reeseville Marsh. The first phase of this service will be an upgrade of Canadian Pacific's former Milwaukee Road trackage from Milwaukee to near the Madison airport; Amtrak's *Empire Builder* already uses the Milwaukee-Watertown segment. Randy Wade, Passenger Rail Manager for Wisconsin DOT, told *PASSENGER TRAIN JOURNAL* that the planned service will offer ten trips in each direction between Chicago and Milwaukee, with six trips each way between Milwaukee and Madison, as extensions of CHI-MKE trains. Trackage from Milwaukee to Madison will be upgraded and equipped with Positive Train Control to permit immediate operation at speeds up to 110 m.p.h. Service between Chicago and Milwaukee will remain at 79 m.p.h. initially. Amtrak's Chicago-Milwaukee service carried 454,000 passengers in 2000. Increased frequencies, new stations at Milwaukee Airport and Sturtevant, slightly faster running times (the timetabled 89 minutes inclusive of three stops is frequently 84 minutes in practice, with no evidence of the Genesis diesels transmuted into Milwaukee Road super 4-4-2 steam locomotives enroute) have attracted 766,000 riders in 2008. WisDOT anticipates a total ridership of 1.08 million people in the first year of operation. Some of those will be additional MKE-CHI riders attracted by greater frequencies, and some will be additional riders from proposed new stations at Watertown, Oconomowoc, and Brookfield/Waukesha. (More numbers than you

care to look at: <http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/projects/state/docs/mwrrri-economic.pdf>.) Mr Wade also informed *PTJ* that WisDOT would be submitting a request for \$600 million in economic stimulus funding in August 2009. Should the project be approved, construction would take about two years.

The exact routing beyond Madison to the Twin Cities, should funding become available, is yet to be determined. An organization called On Board Midwest (<http://www.onboardmidwest.org/>) is organizing citizens along the existing Hiawatha route via LaCrosse and Winona in support of that routing for the faster service. Some residents of Rochester, Minn., are also organizing, and conversation on the high-speed rail weblogs indicates that a routing via Eau Claire, making use of the Dakota/Twin Cities "400" line west of Camp Douglas and Wyeville, also a possibility.

The terminus at Madison's airport, Truax Field—which is nearly five miles from the Capitol, numerous state offices, and the University of Wisconsin—is a potential weakness of the initial project, especially considering that Madison has a very much alive city

center. An April 2, 2009, article in the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* (<http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/42366067.html>) notes discontent among potential passengers, many of whom have business in central Madison and have calculated that whatever advantages the train might offer in getting close to Madison are dissipated in hiring a cab or riding a bus from the airport.

The problem is as old as railroading: a fast train that diverts into each major population center becomes a slow train. Because of Madison's geography, a diversion into a downtown station through a crowded urban area would add 30 minutes to the schedule, much of it in retracing its path through the isthmus to rejoin the mainline. Further, modern passenger train stations require passenger parking, something that is at a premium in Madison. Mr. Wade noted that an expansion of the service—once the extension to Portage and the Twin Cities was in operation—to provide trains that terminate in downtown Madison was being considered.

The Dane Alliance for Rational Transportation, a Madison citizens' organization, proposes what we think is the best, immediate solution: a passenger station in the curve joining the Watertown and Portage lines (<http://www.rationaltransportation.org/yesyaha>). That location, called "Yahara Station," is on the isthmus at First Street and East Washington Avenue, and though it is still some distance from the capitol, it is close to several bus lines and in an area ripe for redevelopment. The proposers note that the station is on the east side of the proposed coach yard, allowing for services to originate or terminate at Yahara Station rather than running mostly empty to the airport.

The downside is that this last-minute change in plans could jeopardize the whole project's "shovel ready" status in regard to the stimulus funding. But it's obvious this station will be a must at some point to ensure the line's success.

TOP: The Wisconsin state capital may be seeing Amtrak trains as early as 2012. COMPOSITE PHOTO BY HOWARD ANDE, MIKE SCHAFER, AND DAVE PEDERSEN. BELOW: Improvements to the Chicago-Milwaukee corridor, such as the new Sturtevant station shown below in August 2006, and increased frequencies have prompted dramatic climbs in Hiawatha Service ridership. An extension of this service beyond Milwaukee to Madison will almost assuredly reap ever greater ridership numbers if the Madison station location controversy can be solved. BRIAN HECHEL

