Amtrak passenger trains in Michigan hobbled by decaying infrastructure

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In January, the Obama administration triumphantly announced $8 billion in grant money for “high-speed rail.” This is largely a misnomer. In the rest of the world, “high-speed rail” generally implies speeds of 150, 186, or now, even 220 miles per hour.

In the United States, the “vision of high-speed rail” now means practically any new passenger service, including trains operating at 90 mph—a feat achieved behind steam engines in the 1930s. Two projects, in California and Florida, are billed as 150-mph trains, but their construction is by no means certain and their extent is limited. Other projects face political opposition and are already being canceled outright.

Meanwhile, regular Amtrak routes across the country face delays, failing equipment and limited capacity.

In Michigan, Norfolk Southern (NS) railroad lowered the speed for passenger trains last week on a 23.8-mile section of track to 40 mph, down from 79 and 60 mph. National passenger carrier Amtrak operates three trains each way over the track, carrying patrons between the Detroit metro area and Chicago.

The lower speed will increase trip times by at least 11 minutes. While this is a relatively minor delay, it is only the latest in a series of setbacks for the service. Delays from old infrastructure and congestion have made on-time arrival increasingly rare.

Amtrak’s route between Chicago and Detroit is especially unusual and historic. The Michigan Central railway operated passenger service beginning in the 1840s—the station at Jackson, Michigan, is the oldest continuously operating station in the country—and Amtrak assumed operation upon its formation in 1971.

A portion of this Michigan line, between Porter, Indiana, and Kalamazoo, Michigan, is one of the few areas where Amtrak owns the track, rather than a freight railroad. Through federal funding, the speeds have increased to 95 mph, and after more than a decade of proposals, the section is supposed to be upgraded to 110 mph using grant money from the Obama administration. At present, Amtrak only operates at such speeds (or more) on the East Coast.

This 97-mile section, though, is just the middle of the route. From Porter, Indiana, to Chicago, Amtrak operates on perhaps the busiest freight railroad mainline into Chicago, owned by Norfolk Southern Railroad. Delays are an everyday occurrence, as faster-moving passenger trains vie for space with long, heavy freight trains.

Some improvement will come from the CREATE project, a government- and railroad-funded effort to reduce congestion within the Chicago area, which is the biggest point of railroad interchange in the country. The organization notes that “In 2008, trains on Amtrak routes to the east and south encountered more than 3,400 hours of delay entering and exiting the Chicago area due to interference from freight, commuter and other Amtrak trains. This is equivalent to nine hours of delay every day to the 18 daily Amtrak trains to downstate Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and other points to the east and south.”

For trains to Michigan, CREATE will offer little improvement, as it does not address congestion across heavily industrial Northern Indiana. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, railroads ruthlessly abandoned and reduced capacity in response to falling traffic. This “rationalization” of traffic has now created severe undercapacity on many corridors. On the Norfolk Southern route, which Amtrak uses across Northern Indiana, what used to be four tracks has been reduced mostly to just two, a severe constraint for rising traffic levels.

East of Kalamazoo, Amtrak also operates on the track of Norfolk Southern, yet in this case, the *lack* of freight traffic is causing increasing delays. Kellogg and Post cereal factories in Battle Creek, Michigan, have lowered production, both GM and Ford have ended or reduced production in Ypsilanti, Dearborn, and Detroit, and many other industrial customers have disappeared.

So much traffic has been lost that Norfolk Southern no longer even runs a freight train across the length of the line. Instead, remaining traffic is pulled by “locals” and consolidated elsewhere. In October, Norfolk Southern spokesman Rudy Husband told *Crain’s Business Detroit*: “Based on our current and anticipated level of business, we could maintain those tracks at 25 mph and meet our customer’s needs. Obviously, maintaining 25 mph for passenger service is not feasible.”

Norfolk Southern has been in discussion with the state of Michigan and Amtrak to sell the line, and on October 28 the route obtained an offer for a $161 million federal grant to upgrade the speed to 110 mph and carry out other

improvements. The Michigan state legislature must approve at least $37 million in matching funds. On December 3, the Senate failed to pass such a bond measure.

Hence, what could be some 230 miles of 110-mph track now faces nearly the opposite possibility. A hundred miles will be improved, but from Kalamazoo all the way to Dearborn—over 130 miles—the speed is being drastically reduced. First it fell from 79 mph to 60 mph across the whole section, and now, 24 miles run at just 40 mph. More reductions are likely to occur as track deteriorates.

Combined with delays around Chicago, scarcely a train now arrives on time. Since last week's speed reduction, most of the westbound trains into Chicago have been 15 to 45 minutes late. The 15 eastbound trains since last Wednesday fared even worse; nearly every one was over an hour late into Detroit, and one was 2 hours and 40 minutes late. In October, the on-time performance of trains in Michigan, which includes a train each to Port Huron and Grand Rapids, was only 50 percent.

In announcing the potential federal grants, Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm stated a trip to Detroit-Chicago would take four hours after speeds are increased. At present, the schedule is five hours, 30 minutes, but in reality it most likely will take at least six hours.

In 1953, Detroit-Chicago trains were scheduled for as little as five hours, and there were six round trips a day, compared to three at present. Since the creation of Amtrak, service to Canada via Windsor or Port Huron has been cut, there is no longer service from Detroit to Toledo, and many stations have been downgraded. Most notably, the landmark Michigan Central station in Detroit was left for abandonment in January 1988, replaced by a building trailer on the same property. Six years later, a small station opened on Woodward Avenue in Detroit.

It is said that the Michigan Department of Transportation may find the $37 million to purchase the Kalamazoo-Dearborn service, but in the current climate of austerity by both state and federal governments, there can be little assurance. Since the November election, incoming Republican governors have rejected federal grants for passenger rail funding in several states.

In Wisconsin, Democratic Governor Jim Doyle politely obliged the anti-rail sentiments of incoming Republican Governor Scott Walker and immediately halted work on an $810 million grant for Milwaukee-Madison service. Supporters of the construction held rallies in Madison, Milwaukee, Oshkosh, Eau Claire and La Crosse. Walker's transition director, John Hiller, responded: "The Madison-Milwaukee train line is dead."

Republican Governor-elect John Kasich in Ohio has asked US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood if a $400 million grant for initial rail service between Cincinnati, Columbus and Cleveland could instead be spent on road construction or freight lines. LaHood rejected the request, and the money may go elsewhere. Cincinnati has Amtrak service only three days a week; two daily trains pass through Cleveland in the dead of night, and Columbus, Ohio's largest city and the state capital, no longer has any rail service.

The federal government is asking for $271 million back from the state of New Jersey after Republican Governor Chris Christie stopped construction on a new Hudson River rail tunnel on October 27, citing larger-than-estimated costs. The tunnel would have relieved pressure on the current century-old tunnels, which operate at peak capacity—a train every 2.5 minutes—during rush hour. Any breakdown causes a massive ripple effect of delays. The cancellation put to an end 15 years and $600 million worth of engineering and environmental studies, as well as initial construction of the tunnel itself.

Yet despite persistent efforts to reduce and limit funding for passenger rail, outdated equipment, slow speeds, and common delays, Amtrak continues ridership growth. Amtrak's fiscal year 2010 ridership grew by 5.7 percent to a high of 28.7 million. Since 2000, overall ridership has grown 37 percent. In 2010, regional- and state-supported trains and even notoriously delay-prone long-distance trains actually had greater gains than the more modern Northeast Corridor.

In Michigan, 479,782 passengers rode the Wolverine Service from Chicago to Detroit in fiscal year 2009-2010, an increase of 8 percent from the year before. The Blue Water, from Chicago to East Lansing and Port Huron, saw an 18.7 percent increase from the year before.

Other trains have proved surprisingly popular as well; in Virginia, a new service between Lynchburg and the Northeast Corridor of Washington, D.C., to Boston carried 126,072 passengers in fiscal year 2010, compared to a first-year target of 51,000 passengers.

Undoubtedly, growing Amtrak ridership reflects a crisis of mass transportation in the United States, where every option carries with it burdens. Highways are increasingly crowded, crumbling and potentially expensive. Airline tickets are rising, as well as fees, and a trip on a plane now entails the violation of Fourth Amendment rights as passengers make their way through security gates.