

## RAILCET INTELLIGENCE REPORT #38

To: RAILCET  
From: Ray Chambers  
Date: October 20, 2025

Subject: Midwest Connect -New Passenger Route Receives funding

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**Amtrak Surprises Passengers With New Route Proposal Connecting Multiple Midwest Cities:** <https://share.google/WtSP9SFJmUu2CGG5H>

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Today there are fifteen federally subsidized Long-Distance Routes and thirty-one state subsidized City pair routes under 750 miles that make up the National Intercity Network. The FRA Corridor ID program has provided sixty-nine grants for additional corridor projects. These projects are in various stages of development all across the nation. While Amtrak dominates this scene, the law authorizes competition for operations and services on the intercity corridors.

One route that has a CID Step 1 Corridor Initiation Grant is the 545 mile “Midwest Connect” which would link Chicago, Fort Wayne, Columbus, and Pittsburgh. This week the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission announced \$650,000 has been committed by local partners, including MORPC, the City of Fort Wayne, and the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission—to provide the local match which will permit advancement of the Connect to CID FRA Step 2 Service Development Plan (SDP). Step 2 SDP is expected to cost \$6.5 million with FRA providing 90%. The total cost for implementation and construction is unclear. Advocacy groups have estimated about \$162 million, but that is probably low.

Amtrak is fully cooperating in the Midwest Connect project. Interestingly, as I understand it, the LD Midwest Connect is not structured to receive a direct federal operating subsidy as do the fifteen long-distance routes now administered by Amtrak. The difficulty of getting multiple states and local jurisdictions to put up an annual operating subsidy would certainly complicate matters. This would put it in the same category as the Big Sky Authority LD proposal between Chicago and Seattle. Big Sky is pushing hard for legislation to receive a federal subsidy as do all the legacy LD routes in operation now. Perhaps there is an alliance?

This Midwest Connect project is just one project under CID. There is significant activity at the state and local level on all sixty-nine of the proposed CID projects. The question of the future role of Amtrak and competition arises here. Under Secretary Duffy and the USDOT, a major change has taken place. Amtrak now focuses on efficiency and commercialization. Amtrak is

expected to become increasingly like a private company. The goal is for Amtrak to become increasingly like a private company. Certainly, Amtrak will remain a critical player in the expansion of the intercity network. The question is how best to organize the intercity competitive world? Right now, the law permits, encourages, competition for corridor operations. CID opportunities for competition are being identified by AIPRO and RAILCET. The two funded the TRAD Study by Thomas Cornillie. TRAD analyzed the 69 CID projects that received FRA Step 1 Scoping grants. TRAD-Part 1 singled out 31 CID projects that appear suited for a competitive approach. TRAD Part 2 conducted a detailed SWOT analysis on the most promising of those projects and identified twenty-four having the greatest potential. Several state/authorities, including Big Sky and the Chippewa Rail Authority plan to pursue the competition option. Informal discussions with Amtrak are ongoing regarding practical approaches to competition over the next decade. I believe it may be possible to find common ground.

Each of these projects will have major new construction to accommodate passenger trains on freight rights-of-way. In 2026 the trick will be uncovering the opportunities for our RTOA contractors. There is currently an agreement between Rail Labor Act Unions and Rail Construction Unions on how work is to be divided. As new projects arise in the coming years it will be important to stay in communication and refresh that understanding so that the rising tide of passenger rail expansion will float all unionized boats (to mix a metaphor). As both Building Trades Rail Construction and Rail Labor are members of AIPRO, this may be a good forum for discussion on this critical issue.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ray Chambers". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.