

PICKING UP THE PACE

Rail Developments Gather Steam

By Symone C. Skrzycki



The year was 1830. That’s when horse and carriage gave way to a new kind of horsepower.

As the first American-built steam locomotive roared down the tracks, a new era was born. Soon, rail began to propel the economy into new and profitable territory.

Fast forward to present-day Indiana.

When it comes to passenger rail, one may travel on the South Shore line, which runs from South Bend to Chicago, or via Amtrak’s embattled Hoosier State, which runs daily between Chicago and Indianapolis. But that’s only part of Indiana’s rail story.

Transfer of freight continues to deliver a powerful economic impact. The Association of American Railroads reports that Indiana moved 288.4 million tons of freight in 2012 (most recent data).

Additional statistics reveal the following:

- Freight railroads: 41 (ranks No. 3 nationally)
- Freight railroad miles: 4,075
- Freight railroad workers: 6,223
- Average wages and benefits per freight railroad employee: \$105,910

Multi-million dollar infrastructure investments – both north and south – by major railroad companies are moving at full speed. And a proposal to provide high-speed

rail service between Chicago and Columbus, Ohio (with various Indiana stops along the way) is gaining momentum.

How are these efforts driving economic development? Climb aboard, learn more and enjoy the ride.

Spurring growth

Louisville & Indiana Railroad (LIRC), which stretches 106 miles, connects with Norfolk Southern, CSX and various short-line railroads. Serving 40 customers, its largest commodities are grain, steel and plastics.

John Goldman is president of LIRC. His passion for rail – and for his home state of Indiana – is apparent as he describes a \$100 million shared-use plan between Anacostia Rail Holdings (parent company to LIRC) and CSX.

“CSX is looking to get an easement across our railroad to enhance their overall operating efficiencies in the region, in particular the Midwest,” he comments, noting that LIRC offers the most direct route between Louisville and Indianapolis. He calls both destinations gateways to neighboring cities and beyond.

“I’m very excited,” Goldman declares. “There’s a lot of work ahead. The road to getting this completed – even though there’s been a lot of behind-the-scenes-work going on the last couple years – the true work is just now beginning.

“There’s a benefit to it, and it’s not only a benefit to the railroads. It’s a benefit to the communities we run through and, of course,

to the people of Indiana. And I think as time goes on, we’ll really start to see that.”

Upgrades will include swapping out jointed rail with continuously-welded rail and replacing the nearly 100-year-old Flatrock River Bridge in Columbus, which will help elevate LIRC’s current weight restriction.

“When we move from a 263,000-pound (per car) railroad to a 286,000-pound railroad, it puts this railroad in line with our surrounding peers as they are already a ‘286’ railroad,” Goldman asserts. “That eliminates any excuse for not moving heavy cars across this line.

“The southern half of Indiana is a very nice attraction (to prospective customers) and one of the first questions they’ll ask is, ‘Are you a ‘286’ railroad?’ When you say, ‘No,’ they tend to walk away.”

Also on the way: a new, high-tech dispatching office in Jeffersonville (where LIRC is based) and enhanced rail access to the Port of Indiana-Jeffersonville.

“The Port of Indiana is very heavy into the steel and the grain market,” Goldman emphasizes. “In today’s world, (rail) cars coming out of the port or going to the port on us (our line) can pretty much only go south – at least if they’re a ‘286.’ But once this is done, it has the potential to open up markets, either outbound or inbound, to the north. There’s really no limit as to what type of commodity may come on board as a result of this.”

All aboard

Baker Street Station in downtown Fort Wayne was once a flourishing hub for passenger travel. It opened in 1914 (as Pennsylvania Station) and served commuters until 1990. Since then, it has been renovated as a banquet facility.

The Northeast Indiana Passenger Rail Association (NIPRA) wants rail to make a comeback at Baker Street Station and throughout the region with the Northern Indiana/Ohio Passenger Rail initiative.

Mayors of five Hoosier cities (Fort Wayne, Gary, Plymouth, Valparaiso and Warsaw) and four in Ohio (Columbus, Kenton, Lima and Marysville) signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) last August seeking a renewal of passenger service.

“We used to have very strong passenger rail service in our state,” recalls NIPRA president Fred Lanahan. “This is a means of bringing that back and providing more balance, more options for people to travel between large centers – Chicago, for example, and Columbus and smaller stops in between. And possibly connecting from Columbus to Pittsburgh, which we’ve talked to our friends in Ohio about. (That) would open up the whole East Coast for us as well.”

While the ultimate goal is to offer service at speeds of around 100- to 110-miles-per-hour, that likely wouldn’t take place until after several years of operation.

“That’s subject to a number of variables between now and then,” Lanahan explains. “We’d be happy to get initial service at basic Amtrak speeds right now.”

According to a business plan feasibility study released by NIPRA in 2013, restoring service would – over time – create nearly 27,000 jobs. But first, the organization must secure approximately \$2 million

to conduct an environmental impact study for submission to the Federal Railroad Administration.

Pam Holocher, deputy director for planning for the city of Fort Wayne, is hopeful.

She says that in addition to the MOA, “more importantly, we have financial support from these communities, from county councils, from mayors, from universities along the way.”

Right on ‘track’

Cut congestion at the Chicago rail hub. That’s the impetus driving the Indiana Gateway Project.

“This is one of the most congested rail lines and rail corridors in the country in large part because everything that moves east or west across the northern United States gets funneled by the Great Lakes and namely – in this area – Lake Michigan,” asserts Will Wingfield, director of media relations at the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT).

“The overall objective of the project is to give train dispatchers more options in terms of being able to route train traffic through the area more efficiently.”

INDOT received \$71.4 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Indiana Gateway, located in Northwest Indiana between Porter and the Illinois state line, is divided into eight subprojects. Seven involve Norfolk Southern’s Chicago Line. Universal crossovers will be added at five locations (one project has been completed); three locations will construct a third mainline track. The subproject focusing on the Amtrak Michigan Line will build a new passing siding to enable

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A view of the Louisville & Indiana Railroad (LIRC). Upgrades to the LIRC (left) will conclude within seven years, while the Indiana Gateway project (right) will wrap up by the end of 2016.

Railroads

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meeting trains to pass each other.

Mike Riley, manager of INDOT's rail office and project manager for Indiana Gateway, spent 21 years as a railroad employee. The initiative is close to his heart.

"This is going to be a huge year. I'm up

there (in the northern part of the state) every other week," he shares. "And when you're talking about local economic development, there are a lot of local businesses that are involved in the project and sub-contractors through the railroads, so it does have a local effect."

Wingfield reflects on Indiana Gateway's national significance.

"With this being one of the most congested rail lines in the nation, this is significant – not just for Indiana but for the nation's transportation and commerce as well."



Capturing a moment at Baker Street Train Station during the 1970s. Opening day – March 23, 1914 – drew 10,000 people (*Baker Street Train Station photo archives*). Today, it houses a banquet facility (*Glow Photography*).

RESOURCES: John Goldman, Louisville & Indiana Railroad, at www.anacostia.com/railroads/lirc | Fred Lanahan, Northeast Indiana Passenger Rail Association, at niprarail.org | Pam Holocher, city of Fort Wayne, at www.cityoffortwayne.org | Mike Riley and Will Wingfield, Indiana Department of Transportation, at www.in.gov/indot