

INDOT – INDIANA STATE RAIL PLAN Passenger Rail User Group Interview Questions

GENERAL INFORMATION

Date of Interview: October 16, 2020

Subject Name: Indiana Passenger Rail Alliance

Location: Indianapolis (Interview via webex)

Subject Representative: Steven Coxhead, President

QUESTIONS

1. What does your organization do? How many employees and/or members does your organization have?

We're a volunteer nonprofit organization. We reach about 1,800 people through our publications. Our mission is to persuade the state to embrace passenger rail, and expand passenger rail travel options, including city to city, intrastate, commuter, and transit services.

Our focus is on promoting corridors using conventional technology with travel speeds of 80 to 100 miles per hour. That's an easier lift, technologically and financially, than establishing bullet train-type high speed rail services. Our goal is to encourage the state to support and establish modern passenger rail systems similar to those found in other parts of the United States.

Our initial focus is on reinstating the Hoosier State corridor between Indianapolis and Chicago.

We don't get involved in political campaigns. We like to publicize what's possible and what's happening, and get support for public policy initiatives.

2. What makes people in Indiana decide to take a passenger train instead of driving or taking a bus or something else? What conditions would be necessary to convert more trips to passenger rail trips?

Highway volumes continue to grow on I-65. Whenever new lanes are added, they fill up and congest immediately. Truck traffic is heavy on I-65. The traffic continues to grow and create constraints and inconveniences for drivers. Every day, there's a traffic outage due to construction or accidents.

If rail were available, Indiana residents would have a way to travel within the state that they could use instead of congested highways.

Rail is an all-weather mode. It allows for safer travel during times of poor visibility or unsafe driving conditions. Rail has an advantage in bad weather.

And it can provide a more convenient alternative. If you are driving, all you can do is drive. If you are on a train, you can work, sleep, eat, read, and relax.

3. What are the most important reasons for Indiana to have passenger rail service?
(e.g. provide alternative to driving for shorter trips such as intercity commuting; provide alternative to driving for longer trips out of state; other)

Passenger rail travel provides a safe and convenient way to travel. Plus, your time becomes more useful. Time spent in a car or behind a wheel is confining. The ability to work or use the time on board the train the way you want to use it is attractive.

Business travelers on the I-65 corridor would benefit. The corridor already has a large business travel component. Universities along the I-65 corridor would benefit from having a non-automobile travel option between Indianapolis and Chicago. Recreational travel between Indianapolis and Chicago would benefit. People in the corridor go to Chicago for festivals and to Indianapolis for Colts football games.

Another benefit would be the ability to use the train as an extension of a long distance air trip to Indiana through O'Hare Airport. Many Indiana residents and workers use O'Hare Airport.

We do not expect that the train would fully replace highway and air trips, but it would fill an existing need for other types of travel alternatives, especially for business and recreational trips in the I-65 corridor.

4. What are the most important aspects of a passenger rail service to you?
(e.g., frequency of departures, trip time, reliability, station stops)

Good timekeeping. On-time performance is key. People will accept other shortcomings in departures times or trip times or speed if the service is reliable.

Convenience is second. Schedules have to be timed to make sense for travelers. The departures have to be geared to times when people want to travel.

Trip times might be a distant third. You would like the service to be as fast or somewhat faster than a private auto. Limiting station stops to maintain a faster trip time is a good idea.

Modern equipment and amenities are also important, but not as important as the other attributes. The ability to bring bikes on board, checked baggage service, food service all help create an attractive service, but are not as critical as good timekeeping.

5. Is there enough awareness of existing passenger rail services in the state? If not, how should these services be promoted?

Awareness of existing services is low. It's been a long time since we've had an efficient rail service in Indiana.

The focus should be on what is being planned for the future, and how rail fits in.

There is a lack of awareness of what is possible with modern rail systems. There is a lack of awareness of how rail can improve travel between Indianapolis and Chicago. There is a lack of awareness of Indiana as part of a megaregion with Illinois and Ohio, and how transportation can be used to strengthen travel within the megaregion and simultaneously help support and improve Indiana as a great place for people to live and do business within that megaregion. Indiana has to be connected with national and international markets.

6. How has the recent COVID-19 pandemic changed user trends for passenger rail?

The pandemic probably has not had much of an impact to Amtrak rail service in the state, since there was so little of it to begin with.

7. Within what timeframe do you anticipate passenger ridership will return to pre-pandemic levels? Or do you foresee that certain travel patterns will move away from rail as a result of the pandemic?

COVID has had an effect on the state's ability to fund programs and services. The initial focus should be a big safety-focused PR campaign telling people that it is safe to travel by train.

There is some indication that people are getting out and doing more in recent weeks.

Once the virus is behind us, people will still want to travel, live, and work. It's more of a question of how they will do it in the future. In the future, it would be nice not to have to drive yourself everywhere. A safe and convenient passenger rail travel alternative would be an advantage for travelers in Indiana.

8. Where should Indiana be focusing future passenger service improvements? (e.g., more frequencies on existing routes; improved amenities/performance; new routes; station improvements/connections)

Indiana should focus on establishing intercity passenger rail service in corridors where travel demand overall is high, and ensure that the rail service is reliable, uses modern equipment, and operates at times when travelers will want to ride the train.

The Indiana Gateway project improved reliability for existing passenger trains.

9. Are there travel corridors or point-to-point trips that you would like to use rail for or see value in having rail service for, but currently cannot make?

We support a regional approach, with Indianapolis as a travel hub.

Travel on the I-65 corridor would benefit from a passenger rail travel option. Trips to and from Indiana are common and could benefit from rail.

10. What about stations? Are there enough on the existing routes, such as the Cardinal and the Lake Shore Limited or the Michigan trains? Are the facilities and transit connections adequate for the travel needs?

A station serving the Indianapolis Airport would be a good addition to the Hoosier State corridor.

11. What is your impression of the services that are currently provided? How effective are they? Are there specific improvements you have thought about for these services that you would like to see implemented (bottlenecks, service deficiencies)?

The current Amtrak service is fairly sparse. The Cardinal only runs three times a week between Indianapolis and Chicago. The other route is served daily by the Capitol Limited and Lake Shore Limited, but those trains run in the middle of the night and make inconvenient station stops.

12. Did you ride the Hoosier State when it was in operation? What did you like or dislike about that service? If service is on that line is reinstated, what would you like to see happen to make it better than before?

I rode the Hoosier State when the service was being provided with a private contractor that supplied equipment and on-board service attendants. That arrangement didn't work out because of contractual issues.

However, what that model showed was that there was a market in the corridor for a premium service. The higher-priced parlor car service drew ridership and revenue. Even in months when total ridership on the train dropped, revenue continued to increase because a larger percentage of riders that did use the train were choosing the premium service. People were willing to pay more for a more comfortable and enjoyable passenger experience.

13. What other travel corridors that currently have limited service or no passenger rail service at all that would most benefit from the introduction of regularly scheduled passenger trains? Why are these corridors important?

Reinstating passenger rail service on the Indianapolis-Chicago corridor would generate the biggest return on investment. There is a lot of travel activity already in that corridor. Yet bus service is poor, and you can't fly between points in Indiana.

Looking at the economics, we think connecting major Indiana cities with modern passenger rail service would be a useful component to existing systems.

Start with multiple frequencies between Indianapolis and Chicago. Then a logical next step would be extending the trains from Indianapolis to Cincinnati, and from Indianapolis to Louisville. Those rail lines already exist for freight.

It all depends on how serious Indiana is about passenger rail.

14. Are there any state regulations or policies impacting passenger rail service? If so, what changes would you suggest?

We're not aware of any policies or regulatory issues impacting passenger rail in Indiana, probably because there is so little of it.

We would like Indiana to pass a law establishing a State Passenger Rail Commission. This entity would coordinate INDOT and regional efforts, so that projects can be appropriately planned for, and federal grant funding can be awarded.

If we can get grant endorsements from INDOT, NICTD, and Indiana MPOs and regional councils, projects like Indianapolis-Chicago passenger service have a much better chance of receiving funding awards. The commission would not require sustained state funding. The commission would provide a framework for planning and implementation of projects, would have the authority to coordinate with other groups and host railroads, and ultimately would have authority to receive and dispense funds.

We want the Passenger Rail Commission to serve as the administrative structure for expanding passenger rail in the state.

Federal funding is a necessity to implement new passenger rail services, and should be requested and advocated for by INDOT and the state.

We're also hopeful that INDOT's work on reinstating the Hoosier State corridor will provide a model for how to manage other potential new services, such as the Chicago-Fort Wayne-Lima service that is being proposed and planned at a regional level.

We'd like Indiana and INDOT to fund expanded passenger rail services under the same justification that the state subsidizes long-distance air service from Indianapolis to Paris and San Francisco. The state can expand its reach when it sees a specific need. A similar passenger rail reach also would benefit the state. This may also require a more robust state regulatory regime in the future.

15. Are the improvement plans for passenger service that are being pursued by the state in line with what you'd like to see? Do they make sense to you? If not, what would you like to see changed?

Yes. We support INDOT's plan to reinstate the Hoosier State with more frequencies and on more convenient schedules for travelers. We believe this is a reasonable, achievable plan.

INDOT's new plan to transfer riders Chicago riders to NICTD trains at Dyer would avoid the slow trip times to Chicago that passengers currently experience on the Amtrak Cardinal route. We believe that most Hoosier Corridor riders would be going to Chicago to spend time in the city, not to transfer to other Amtrak trains, so arriving and departing Chicago from NICTD's Millennium Park station instead of Chicago Union Station would not be a drawback or detriment to the proposed service.

With that transfer and the speed upgrades to the Indianapolis-Dyer corridor proposed by INDOT, you could probably make a trip from Indianapolis to Chicago in 2.5 hours. That's a realistic target, and a competitive trip time. Chicago-Indianapolis is less than 200 miles.

Service between Dyer and Chicago should consist of at least 3 to 4 round trips per day. You need that level of frequency to get a fighting chance to generate enough ridership and farebox revenue to make the service viable.

The planned service would be an improvement from the previous Hoosier State train. The equipment would be clean and modern.

The project as it is currently being planned also enables the state to maintain the option of selecting a service provider, without being locked into a specific company.

16. Are you optimistic, neutral, or pessimistic about the future of passenger rail service in Indiana, and why?

I'm generally optimistic.

Seeing what happens with the Presidential election and the virus will also provide a much better understanding of what Indiana and the federal government will prioritize in the near term.

I'm optimistic about what is possible, but Indiana politics are cautious. We can see what's possible by looking at passenger rail services that ran in Indiana prior to Amtrak. That provides a good starting point for seeing what is possible in the future if the political vision is there.

Indiana had been reluctant to spend money on passenger rail in the past, but it committed a significant amount of funding to the NICTD expansion projects. That's encouraging. We have to decide and see what politicians will determine next to be important. Who will the politicians listen to?

It all comes down to competitiveness – keeping Indiana a competitive place to live and work. Passenger rail can help play a role in maintaining and expanding Indiana's competitiveness.

17. May we include the name of your organization as one of the subjects we talked with in the INDOT Passenger Rail stakeholder interviews, or alternatively, would you prefer that we identify your organization by the type of agency it is, or would you prefer that your organization remain anonymous?

Please reply.