

Are Passenger Trains Right for Wisconsin?

While staying in Europe, I've travelled quite a bit by train. Passenger trains here are clean, fast, and they mostly run on time. On the trains you see students, families, business people, tourists – pretty much everyone. So, would reviving passenger trains in the U.S. in general, and in Wisconsin in particular, make sense?

Well, maybe. The first question is, who would ride the trains if they were there? Clearly, college students would. Getting your kids home and back for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and so on would be a lot easier with train service, while reducing the number of cars that get warehoused on campus parking lots.

Train travel might also be attractive to people going to Chicago to shop or see a show, or to Milwaukee for a Bucks game or a concert, or to Madison for a Badgers game. After all, no hassle of finding a parking space, no risk of a DUI. And some business people would probably choose train travel so they could work productively during their trip, rather than having to drive.

A less obvious market for train travel would be people flying out of state. When I priced tickets for flying back to the U.S., I found that flying to Milwaukee rather than Chicago would cost an extra \$500 per ticket, and flying into Appleton would be an additional \$1650 per person. Would I take a train rather than pay those rates? Absolutely! In fact, I will be, spending about \$50 each to take the train from Chicago to Milwaukee, and then getting a ride the rest of the way to Oshkosh.

If we did revive train service in Wisconsin, linking Green Bay, Appleton, and Oshkosh into the rail system would be one of the last steps. We are upstream, and tying us in would only make sense once the downstream Madison-Milwaukee link was well established. Besides, those are the two biggest markets, with the most travel destinations; we'd want to see how well that link worked before investing in a Fox Valley line. And before that, the existing Milwaukee-Chicago line should be upgraded to provide faster, more reliable service.

But the very first step would be to build a light rail system in Milwaukee. Milwaukee needs one anyway; ever try driving through Milwaukee during rush hour? The highway system is overloaded, and building more highway capacity is very expensive. So a Milwaukee light rail system to get commuters downtown and back efficiently is already needed.

But light rail would also complement train service. If you took a train to Milwaukee, you'd want a convenient way to get to the ball park, or the suburbs, or wherever (the airport already has Amtrak service). Light rail would do that. And it would give Milwaukee travelers a convenient way to get to the train station downtown, without having to leave their car in some parking lot for a month.

Would passenger trains need a taxpayer subsidy? Of course they would – but that's the wrong question. The right question is, would trains need a bigger or smaller subsidy than other travel modes. Wisconsin's airports, in Appleton and Madison and Eau Claire and you-name-it, are heavily taxpayer subsidized. So rail service from Milwaukee to those cities would most likely save both the travelers and the taxpayers quite a bit of money. And in this last state budget, the Republican majority dropped any remaining pretense that our state highways are anything except income- and sales-tax subsidized. If light rail needs less of a subsidy than expanding all the highways in Milwaukee, wouldn't that be the logical choice?

So, is train service the way to go? Maybe yes, and maybe no. But ignoring it as a viable option is stupid – about as stupid as spending an extra \$2150 just to fly into Appleton.