Getting Ohio up to speed

Introduction to special edition

I'm on my way back from the big meeting — the one my boss expects to read about in a multi-page memo tomorrow morning. Not only do I have to get the memo written pronto, my son is playing in his first high school basketball game tonight, home is still 200 miles away and it's snowing like it always does in these situations. No problem.

Loosening my tie, I take a couple of sips from my beer and begin to convert those rambling meeting notes on my laptop computer into a coherent presentation to the big cheese. Every so often, while pondering the meeting's impact, I look up to notice things around me.

Heavy snow is coming down — sideways, but only because we're zipping across Ohio at 108 mph. At least that's what the digital readout shows at the other end of the car. When it's not displaying the speed, it's flashing how many minutes we're away from the next station. While that's helpful, I keep an eye out for the changes in our speed. Call it the little boy in me. Now we're at the speed limit — 110 mph, and the beer in my glass has nary a ripple.
only slightly different than that of a short-haul flight. And, since most of my meetings are scheduled on short notice, my boss loves saving the company hundreds of dollars otherwise spent on air fares, to say nothing of long taxi rides out to the airport. I wonder if the planes are even flying today, if the road conditions outside my icy window are any indication.

Through the magic of flanged steel wheels, cab signals and 250 tons of train, we're able to slice through this December snowstorm at top speed, and safely, past the parallel highways littered with spun-out cars, jackknifed trucks and upset motorists.

They made their choice — a choice which Ohioans finally have after decades of political inaction. Seems a lot of people made the right choice today, though. The train is packed with students, sightseers and suits heading to or from home.

Before I get to my stop, a suburban station 10 miles from the end of the line, I'll call my wife to pick me up before going to dinner. A fun evening together with the family was a rare thing when I had to drive to meetings everywhere. I don't know how I was able to keep my stress level from popping. But I sure know how to do it these days.

That's a promising future for Ohioans, if organizations, businesses and individuals work hard to create that tomorrow. This special edition of the Ohio Passenger Rail News is devoted to plans and visions for a future that doesn't have to be too far away.

Amtrak negotiating expansion

A widening scope of negotiations have delayed Amtrak's proposed start-up of expanded passenger rail service across Northern Ohio. Amtrak officials had hoped to begin in August a new, Chicago-New York City train called the Skyline Connection via Toledo and Cleveland, and to extend the route of the existing, Chicago-Detroit Lake Cities south to Toledo.

Apparently, however, each time negotiators from Amtrak and track-owning Norfolk Southern Corp. (NS) were near to reaching a deal, more elements were added to the discussions. The scope of the negotiations have widened beyond just these two train services to include other issues, such as future Chicago-East Coast Amtrak expansions and mail/express shipments.

OARP further understands that Amtrak expansion in Northern Ohio may not happen until early 2001. Call the OARP Hotline at (614) 470-0334 or visit www.oarprail.org for the latest updates.
Train of Thought
from Ohio Passenger Rail News Editor
Kenneth Prendergast

Not everyone can appreciate the symptoms. But to rail advocates, transportation planners and other trained eyes, we can see them nearly everywhere and understand why they exist.

The symptoms are the negative side-effects of our 50-year attempt to have just two modes of travel handle this nation's traffic burden. Furthermore, they are the results of public policies, at virtually every level of government in this country, which are asking too much of our road and air transportation systems.

Once you know what to look for, you don't have to look far to find the symptoms of this two-mode limitation. There are, however, a shortage of people in key leadership positions in this country who, for whatever reason, cannot see the symptoms. Nor can they see that the limitations facing those two modes of transportation exist because there are just those two modes.

To us, it's obvious that expanding and modernizing the rail system is a big part of the solution. But it's hard for our leaders to embrace this solution when they can't or won't see that relying on just two modes is a problem.

So, in the interest of helping our leaders be better at what they do, I offer the following samples of symptoms from around Ohio.

In Dayton, neighborhoods surrounding that city's international airport are under stress after a $1.3 billion airport expansion was announced. Tipp City and Monroe Township in southern Miami County sued Dayton and the airport, claiming the city and airport have ignored complaints about noise from existing air traffic. Expect the noise to really take off if the expansion plans happen.

These communities are under such stress and are starting to sue each other only because short- and medium-distance airline flights have no competition. That shouldn't have to be.

Thanks to research from OARP member Carl Tuke, he found out that nearly 33 percent of all Dayton flights go to just four cities — Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh — that are directly linked by rail lines to Dayton. Another 57 percent of all Dayton flights go to cities 300 miles away or less, where fast trains are at their most efficient and where airlines are at their least.

Greater Cleveland has probably Ohio's worst example of public servants and taxpayer-supported entities suing each other over our two-mode travel network.

The cities of Brook Park and Cleveland are locked in a bitter legal battle over the future of the massive, irreplaceable International Exposition Center. Brook Park wants to buy it so it can be preserved — the site once managed millions of visitors to their city each year. Cleveland wants it so they can tear
WANTED
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kprendergast@core.com.

We reserve the right to edit all non-published submissions. Original photos should be sharp, bright prints—avoid negatives.
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Ohio Passenger Rail News
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**Midwest Regional Rail Initiative**

A plan moving past the talk stage

Many plans have come and gone over the years for improving passenger rail service in the Midwest. But none have advanced past the STP stage — Study, Talk, Plan. That is, until now.

The latest plan is the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MRRI), which proposes an 11-route network of fast passenger rail services spider-webbing outward from Chicago across nine states. Most routes would feature short, nimble, fossil-fuel-powered trains on existing rights of way, traveling at speeds of up to 110 mph.

Over the next 10 years, tracks would have to be upgraded, stations expanded or built new, signal system modernized, as well as road-rail crossing safety ensured with new underpasses, "full-closure" gates (see photo at right) or closing surplus crossings. The price tag for developing all 11 routes is $4.1 billion, which would be funded by a mix of federal, state, local and Amtrak dollars.

In the past, some single-route high-speed rail proposals were to cost as much as the entire MRRI, such as previous plans for the Cleveland - Columbus - Dayton - Cincinnati (3-C) Corridor. Those were electric "bullet train" projects, which required all-new railways before a single wheel could turn. The Ohio Association of Railroad Passengers (OARP), while supportive of high-speed rail, had many concerns about those earlier plans. On the other hand, the MRRI project seeks a "building block" approach to upgrade existing rail services and increase train velocities, rather than employ the "big bang" approach attempted before. That is why OARP supports the MRRI project.

Already, a number of states and Amtrak are making the MRRI plan come to life by pumping money into track and station improvements. Amtrak has put $25 million into Chicago-area track improvements, Illinois plans to spend $140 million, Michigan has already spent $25 million and Wisconsin plans to spend $60 million. That's just the start.

Amtrak in September requested bids from manufacturers for 13 tilting, high-speed trains for use on Midwest routes. Eventually, Amtrak will require another 60 to 70 trains, company officials said. The specifications for these trains offer an exciting insight into future travel in the Midwest's rail network.

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**HSR bill gains co-sponsors**

Gov. Taft seeks more supporters

The High-Speed Rail Investment Act is now making its way through the U.S. Senate (as S.1900) and House of Representatives (as HR 3700). This bill, if enacted into law, would leverage a federal investment of $762 million over five years to secure $10 billion in private sector investment for the development of high-speed rail corridors across the nation.

Three routes serving Ohioans should benefit from this funding: Chicago - Cincinnati; Chicago - Toledo - Cleveland; and Cincinnati - Dayton - Columbus - Cleveland (3-C). However, among Ohio's two senators and 19 congressmen, only eight of the 21 legislators thus far have signed as co-sponsors to support the bill.

Co-sponsoring the bills are Senator Mike DeWine and, these congressmen: Lorain's Sherrod Brown, Cleveland's Stephanie Tubbs Jones, Toledo's Marcy Kaptur, Cleveland's Dennis Kucinich, Painesville's Steve LaTourette, Akron's Tom Sawyer, and Youngstown's James Traficant. Governor Bob Taft on Sept. 21 wrote the Ohio delegation asking for more co-sponsors.

The Cleveland Plain Dealer also asked more legislators to support S.1900/HR3700. "Lawmakers should view the high-speed rail legislation as a creative way to help build a modern passenger-rail network comparable to

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**Midwest Corridors comparison**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corridor</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>Revenue-to-revenue expense ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MRRI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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North Carolina DOT photo
Ohio asked to join the Midwest Rail Compact

In testimony given Sept. 19, OARP's Administrative Director Stu Nicholson asked members of an Ohio House of Representatives committee to support a bill that would let Ohio join the Midwest Rail Compact. The compact is an association of states which was formed to strengthen their positions in securing federal funds for the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MRRI) high-speed rail plan. So far, Indiana, Minnesota and Missouri have joined the compact.

Mr. Nicholson asked members the Transportation and Public Safety Committee to move House Bill 717 through the legislative approval process. The bill must be OK'd by both the Ohio House and Senate, as well as by Gov. Bob Taft. Also testifying for the bill that day was Laura Kliewer, senior policy analyst for the Council of State Governments-Midwest, based in Chicago. No one spoke in opposition to HB 717, which is being sponsored by Ohio Rep. James Mettler (R-52) of Toledo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corridor</th>
<th>Ridership</th>
<th>Revenue-to-expense ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chicago-Milwaukee-Madison-Minneapolis</td>
<td>2,450,413</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago-Detroit-Port Huron-Grand Rapids</td>
<td>2,161,626</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through-Chicago Connections</td>
<td>1,635,205</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago-St. Louis</td>
<td>1,315,168</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland-Cincinnati</td>
<td>1,144,038</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago-Omaha</td>
<td>991,598</td>
<td>0.92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chicago-Cincinnati</td>
<td>812,378</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago-Cleveland</td>
<td>776,723</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago-Carbondale</td>
<td>588,981</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis-Kansas City</td>
<td>441,316</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: All data from TEMS Inc.

specifications for these trains offer an exciting insight into future travel in the Midwest's busiest transportation corridors.

The trainsets, capable of 125-mph, will be powered by diesel-electric or gas turbine engines. Each train will be able to seat 300-400 passengers in two classes, such as economy and business. In addition, there will be a cafe car, as well as two cars to carry express packages. Amtrak wants to introduce the new trains in 2003 on three routes from Chicago: to Detroit, to St. Louis, and to Madison via Milwaukee, Railway Age magazine reported.

Two of the MRRI routes from Chicago would serve Ohio — to Toledo and Cleveland; and to Cincinnati. A third route — the 3-C Corridor — is being added to the network by the Ohio Rail Development Commission. It, like the other routes, will be developed incrementally, as funding becomes available.

"It is encouraging to see Ohio take the first steps toward creating a truly intermodal transportation system."

— OARP President Bill Hutchison in an Oct. 6 thank-you letter to Ohio Gov. Bob Taft.

The High Speed Rail Investment Act authorizes Amtrak to sell $10 billion in high-speed rail bonds between 2001 and 2010. The bill would provide tax credits to bondholders in lieu of interest payments, which decreases federal revenues by $762 million over five years and $3.3 billion over 10 years.

The $10 billion may be invested in federally designated high-speed rail corridors to upgrade existing rail lines, construct new dedicated high-speed rail tracks, and to purchase high-speed rail equipment. The Chicago-Cincinnati Corridor has won a federal high-speed rail designation, Chicago-Cleveland's is imminent, and 3-C Corridor's application is pending with the Federal Railroad Administration.

Up to 10 percent of the funds would be available to improve non-high-speed rail service nationwide. States are required to match at least 20 percent of Amtrak's share.

State funds contributed in excess of the 20 percent minimum may go directly towards funding projects. The state matching requirement ensures that Amtrak will work in partnership with the states and invest these funds in only the most economically viable projects.

For more information on the High Speed Rail Investment Act, visit http://lautenberg.senate.gov/highspeed/ on the Internet.
New plan has realism, vision

Last May seems like a long time ago. The state had suddenly canceled a project to add two daily round-trip trains between Cleveland and Columbus, leaving much ill will. Now, Gov. Bob Taft and the Ohio Rail Development Commission are taking a new, bold and comprehensive approach toward developing passenger rail service linking Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton and Cincinnati, called the 3-C Corridor.

The first part of the program involves preserving rail infrastructure and facilities. This would also include securing properties in Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati to construct mail/package express hubs that would benefit Ohio travelers and shippers alike.

Second, a passenger rail service linking Boston and St. Louis via major Ohio markets is being discussed with Amtrak and major shippers. A late-2002 startup date is envisioned. Unlike previous efforts, in which Ohio would indefinitely subsidize train operations, the state might instead finance a fleet of lightweight rail cars for Amtrak to carry time-sensitive freight. Free-market revenues from these shipments would replace state subsidies.

And, third, after receiving a favorable report from Transportation Economic & Management Systems Inc. (TEMS), Gov. Taft and the ORDC have applied to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) for a high-speed corridor designation for the 3-C Corridor. The designation, if approved by the FRA, will make the 3-C Corridor eligible for federal funds. TEMS recommended that the 3-C route should be a part of the emerging Midwest rail network.

"Being a part of it (the rail system) will set those cities apart from those that are not," said Cincinnati Mayor Ken Prendergast. "The solutions? More travel modes, like rail, and less wasteful land use, the report said.

"State legislators and administrators need to see Ohio is totally in the dark ages when it comes to transportation," said Columbus Councilman Richard Sensenbrenner. "Local officials are critical in asking for, or even demanding a top-tier, multi-modal transportation system in Ohio. Informational efforts by the Ohio Association of Rail Passengers are extremely critical to keep the issue before elected officials, the public, administrators, environmental groups, and others."

Sally A. Jackson, president and CEO of the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, added that, "In all of our surveys, local CEOs identify transportation as a critical aspect of business success. Why? They recognize that in order for Greater Columbus to continue to grow we must be able to better link workers with jobs."
Intercity passenger trains on the 3-C Corridor would be a desirable addition to the Columbus cityscape. Passenger rail is a critical component necessary to achieve that goal.

For 3-C, capital costs to upgrade tracks and signals, separate road and rail crossings, build transportation centers and acquire train equipment are estimated to be between $611 million and $720 million. The lower dollar figure assumes a single-track operation with passing sidings; the higher figure assumes an all-double-track operation.

"I am very encouraged by this plan, which was jointly put together by the ORDC and Amtrak," said OARP Administrative Director Stu Nicholson. "This is such a complete turnaround from what we were experiencing in May. To the credit of Gov. Taft, ORDC and its Executive Director Jim Seney, this plan shows they now realize the breadth and depth of support for passenger rail service in Ohio."

Cleveland-Columbus-Cincinnati
Proposed high-speed rail service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Route distance</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>2010 population within</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 miles of route</td>
<td>7 million+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolling stock costs</td>
<td>$67 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-of-way costs</td>
<td>$645 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily round-trip trains</td>
<td>6-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running time</td>
<td>3.5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top train speed</td>
<td>110 mph</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average train speed</td>
<td>75 mph</td>
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<tr>
<td>One-way fares/Economy</td>
<td>$55.91*</td>
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<tr>
<td>One-way fares/Business</td>
<td>$90.27*</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010 ridership</td>
<td>1.13 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revenue/operating costs</td>
<td>118%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*maximum Cleveland-Cincinnati fare; round-trip discounts may apply

Current rail passenger service

| Daily round-trip trains | Zero |
| Running time | N/A |
| Top train speed | N/A |
| Average train speed | N/A |
Ohio’s busiest rail corridor

Of all the rail corridors involving Ohio, the Cleveland - Toledo - Chicago route is perhaps the closest to offering an advanced level of passenger service. That’s because it already has the most passenger trains in Ohio, and is due to get more by early next year. All these trains are part of a larger Chicago-East Coast matrix of routes which fan outward east of Ohio.

The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MRRI) proposes to add four or five more trains to the Cleveland-Chicago corridor, at speeds of up to 110 mph. A third track would be added along the entire 341-mile, double-tracked Norfolk Southern Corp. mainline.

"We need a serious commitment, both financial and legislative, to the development of freight AND passenger infrastructure in this state," said Rob Greenlese, director of surface transportation for the Toledo/Lucas County Port Authority. "Don’t get me wrong — the governor’s recently announced rail grade crossing separation program is a good thing. But, that’s not real rail development."

Dennis Hodges, vice president of the Indiana High Speed Rail Association, says an effective way year, but highway widenings are becoming increasingly problematic. About 1.4 million travelers last year opted for commercial flights, mostly between Cleveland and Chicago, where airport congestion delays are common but vacant land for expansion isn’t. Another 600,000 people traveled by intercity bus in the corridor.

Business and leisure travelers mix together in this corridor. In addition to the business centers of Chicago, Cleveland and Toledo, leisure travelers flock to Cedar Point and the Lake Erie Islands near Sandusky, and to the Flats and lakefront attractions in downtown Cleveland. Cleveland Planning Director Hunter Morrison says a rail link to Chicago is a natural, considering that getting around by car in the “Midwest’s Capital City” is more of a pain than a plus.

Al Swift, a retired Washington state congressman who now works for train manufacturer Talgo America Corp., says states are slowly seeing the need for investing in fast passenger trains.

"States are trying to figure out the least expensive ways of moving people," Mr. Swift said, "and intercity rail is the least expensive way. It makes a lot more sense to take an existing rail right of way and rebuild it incrementally for higher speeds."

One of the most fascinating aspects to the rail corridor is its potential to link up with airports near all three large cities. The closest air-rail link is at Cleveland (see photo at left). The short-term parking deck for Hopkins International Airport is but a Boeing 737’s length away from the Cleveland-Toledo-Chicago Corridor. The closest air-rail link is at Cleveland (see photo at left).

Ken Prendergast map

Chicago-Toledo-Cleveland Corridor

Cleveland’s lakefront, near the future North Coast Transportation Center.

The German ICE train visits Toledo Central Union Plaza.
to plant the seeds for rail development is to give the public a rail demonstration. That means bringing advanced passenger trains to the Midwest so people can see, touch and ride what they've been missing.

"Demonstrations are essential to Midwest success," Mr. Hodges said. "Somehow, we must find a clear answer as to how to overcome the odds working against the Midwest and to get demonstration trains here. I, for one, have become passionate about the idea."

Travel demand is strong in the corridor — 116 million trips were taken last year. About 98 percent of those were by car, and were mostly short trips on intermediate sections of the corridor that aren't subject to rail, air or even bus competition.

Of the travel demand diverted to rail, 58 percent is projected to come from the automobile, according to Transportation Economics & Management Systems Inc. (TEMS), which produced the MRRI report. Road traffic is rising at about 2 percent each

Cleveland-Toledo-Chicago
Proposed high-speed rail service

<table>
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<td>$76 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Right-of-way costs</td>
<td>$848 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily round-trip trains</td>
<td>8-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running time</td>
<td>Four hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top train speed</td>
<td>110 mph</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average train speed</td>
<td>85 mph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-way fare/Economy</td>
<td>$75.73*</td>
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<tr>
<td>One-way fare/Business</td>
<td>$117.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 ridership</td>
<td>776,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue/operating cost</td>
<td>130-150%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* maximum Cleveland-Chicago fares; round-trip discounts may apply

Current rail passenger service

| Daily round-trip trains | Three |
| Running time | Seven hours |
| Top train speed | 79 mph |
| Average train speed | 49 mph |

A short, enclosed walkway between Cleveland Hopkins International Airport's long-term parking deck and a future station on the Amtrak mainline, in the background, is all that's needed to link Northern Ohio cities to long-distance national and international flights.

"The intersecting of various modes (of transportation) is a great benefit," Mr. Swift said. "Unfortunately, we have long way to go in this country before those things happen on more than just an accidental basis. But, boy, where that happens, it's of great benefit."
A passenger-only rail corridor

Unlike other proposed fast-train corridors in the Midwest, the Cincinnati - Indianapolis - Chicago Corridor wouldn't have to share tracks or even the same rail route as slower, heavier freight trains. Instead, several abandoned rail lines would be rebuilt into a state-of-the-art, high-speed passenger rail corridor. The only sections where the Cincinnati-Chicago corridor would use existing tracks are in the three metropolitan areas.

This should lend well to high average train speeds, which are the ultimate goal of increased velocities. Another goal is making sure the rail service goes where travelers want. To that end, the Indiana High Speed Rail Association (IHSRA) was able to convince Indiana transportation planners and federal officials that the proposed Indianapolis-Chicago portion should be moved.

Previously, the proposed corridor had swung northwest from Lafayette, IN to...
Kankakee, IL before turning north to Chicago. This was part of the former New York Central Corp. route from Cincinnati to Chicago, where streamlined steam locomotives hauled sleek passenger trains at 100 mph speeds. But, following tradition isn't what this project is all about, IHSRA founder and Vice President Dennis Hodges noted.

The proposed new route would head due north from Lafayette on the abandoned Monon Corp. rail line to near Porter, IN, where it would join the high-speed lines from Detroit and Cleveland. Thus, trains from all three corridors would funnel into Chicago on shared tracks (see "East of Chicago fast delivery" page seven). However, putting fast trains on the Monon route, where none have been for years, also raises the possibility of coping with NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) opponents.

Mr. Hodges points out that putting Chicago-Cincinnati trains on the Monon route would make it easier for travelers from Cincinnati and Indiana to reach Michigan destinations, without having to go all the way into downtown Chicago. Instead, travelers could transfer between trains at a new station at the Gary Regional Airport. Also, because this airport is rapidly expanding with commercial air traffic, an air-rail transfer station in Gary (which would replace the undersized facility at nearby Hammond/Whiting, IN) would allow short- and medium-distance rail travelers to connect with longer-distance flights.

Station facilities exist in the major cities of Chicago and Indianapolis, but it is doubtful that Cincinnati Union Terminal may be used for expanded passenger rail services. That's because of the extremely congested rail traffic conditions around the adjacent Queensgate freight yard. To ensure the reliability and high average speed of passenger trains to Chicago and Cleveland, a new station is being pursued on the riverfront.

Unlike the poorly located River Road station which Amtrak used from 1974 to 1993, this new station would be located closer to downtown and next to some exciting riverfront redevelopment projects, including Paul Brown Sta-
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Cleveland  Randall Park Mall Travel Agency  (440) 475-8747  (800) 999-2434  Robert Peck
Columbus  Ohio Automobile Club/AAA Travel  (614) 431-7823
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Sandusky  Richard A. Fry  419 / 526-3775
Steve La Conte  419 / 668-6225

AREA CODES

Cincinnati  513 / 937:
Dayton  W. Mike Weber  513 / 891-9251
Clermont  Linda Leas  937 / 253-8448
Springfield  Ronald D. Garner  513 / 444-3098
Stephen Klipfel  937 / 882-6521

AREA CODES

Columbus  614 / 740:
Delaware  Robert Boyce  614 / 486-7039
Tom Allen  740 / 369-5804
East of Chicago fast delivery

It's not a new pizza company slogan. But it is a way to get fast passenger trains from Detroit, Cleveland and Cincinnati into downtown Chicago on a high-speed route. Amtrak has been acquiring segments of old rail lines along the south shore of Lake Michigan to eventually complete a passenger-only funnel from Chicago Union Station to Porter, IN — where rail lines to Michigan, Ohio and the rest of Indiana begin fanning out.

Even if Amtrak completed this funnel route tomorrow, it would be one of the busiest Amtrak corridors in the nation. Using this corridor would be a total of 18 existing passenger trains daily, which use parallel freight and passenger rail routes to Grand Rapids, MI, Toronto, ON, Detroit, MI, Boston, MA, New York, NY, Philadelphia, PA, and Washington DC. The suburban Chicago station at Hammond/Whiting, IN would be demolished in favor of a new suburban station, possibly at the growing Gary Regional Airport.

But, if the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative plan is fully developed, the number of passenger trains using this funnel route would swell to more than 54 each day. That would make for one busy piece of railroad east of Chicago, any way you slice it.

A record year for Amtrak

Amtrak is on course to set a record for annual ticket revenue and to break its all-time annual ridership record of 22.2 million passengers. A 21-year high of nearly 2.1 million passengers rode Amtrak in August, leading to an all-time monthly ticket revenue record of $108.4 million. The record setting August ticket revenues broke July's record ticket revenues of $107.2 million, and was the third month in a row that ridership surpassed 2 million.

Airport and highway congestion plus record flight delays are partly credited for Amtrak's ridership increases.