



## **It's a go for second daily train to Chicago from St. Paul**

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A yearslong effort to establish a second daily passenger train trip between St. Paul and Chicago received a critical \$10 million boost at the Legislature last week, meaning additional service to the Windy City is expected to begin in 2024.

Money from the state — part of a \$7 billion omnibus transportation bill signed by Gov. Tim Walz on Saturday — was the final piece needed to jump-start the additional round-trip service to Chicago's Union Station.

"This is a major victory," said Brian Nelson, president of All Aboard Minnesota, a St. Paul-based passenger rail advocacy group.

The fate of the project's funding wasn't always ensured as the session dragged on — many Republicans at the Capitol have opposed adding more rail service.

But in the end, the measure won bipartisan support with the House approving the broader transportation bill 112 to 21, and the Senate, 67 to zero.

"It was a long, intense, effort," said Rep. Frank Hornstein, DFL-Minneapolis, who chairs the House Transportation Finance and Policy Committee. "This proposal has been around for many years."

Minnesota's infusion leverages a \$32 million federal grant awarded in 2020, with Wisconsin kicking in \$6.2 million and Amtrak adding another \$5 million.

The idea is to supplement existing Amtrak service on the Empire Builder route, which connects Chicago to Seattle or Portland, Ore., through the Union Depot in St. Paul.

Eastbound trains, in particular, are often delayed because they share track with freight rail.

In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged train travel, the Empire Builder ran on schedule only 44% of the time.

Advocates claim delays between St. Paul and Chicago will be less likely than those encountered by the Empire Builder west of the Twin Cities.

The trip would take about 7.5 hours and feature the same stops, including Red Wing and Winona in Minnesota.

The second train is expected to ferry some 124,000 passengers between the two cities a year, giving Minnesotans an alternative to driving or flying, according to Nelson.

"Passenger rail offers a real choice and will entice more travel and tourism for our state," he said.

While new schedules supplementing Empire Builder service have not been finalized, the train would likely leave St. Paul shortly before noon and arrive in Chicago just after 7 p.m.; the returning train would leave Chicago about 11 a.m. and arrive in St. Paul shortly after 6 p.m.

In addition, the federal government has awarded Minnesota and Wisconsin \$12.6 million to help pay for the second train's first three years of operating costs, estimated between \$11 million and \$12.5 million annually (to be offset in part by fare revenue).

Funding for the second train comes as President Joe Biden pushes a nearly \$1 trillion infrastructure plan that sets aside \$66 billion to enhance passenger rail service across the country.

"I have nothing but affection for Amtrak, having traveled over a million miles on it, commuting [as a senator] every day," Biden said in a recent press briefing.

Talk of bolstering long-languishing passenger rail service gained traction last spring when Biden's initial infrastructure plan called for an \$80 billion investment. Amtrak responded by releasing an ambitious blueprint that called for new and improved rail corridors nationwide.

Those plans included the second train between St. Paul and Chicago, as well as service to Duluth from the Twin Cities.

But funding for the Northern Lights Express to the North Shore, which could cost up to \$600 million, was not included in the state transportation measure.

Amtrak CEO Bill Flynn said in a statement the rail provider is ready to make the second train to Chicago a reality "as soon as possible.

The Minnesota funding bill will help "enable all of the Amtrak cities on the route to have more travel options that are comfortable, reliable and environmentally friendly," he said.

But Randal O'Toole, senior fellow at the Libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., noted a trip on Amtrak between St. Paul and Chicago takes nearly eight hours, with fares starting at \$58, while it takes less than 90 minutes to fly for as low as \$50.

"Why should taxpayers subsidize a slow, expensive train when the airlines can move people much faster and more efficiently with almost no subsidies?" he asked in an e-mail.

"Amtrak is a luxury we don't need," O'Toole added. "In 2019, the average American traveled well over 2,000 miles by air and less than 20 miles by Amtrak. Why should people who don't ride it pay taxes to subsidize it?"

Nonetheless, work will soon begin on upgrading existing infrastructure to make way for the new service, including rail and signal improvements at Winona and La Crescent.