

# Reconnecting Michigan

A Vision for Cross-State Transit



**TRU** Transportation Riders United

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# Information

Transportation Riders United is a Detroit-based nonprofit organization with over 25 years of transit advocacy experience. TRU believes everyone should be able to get where they need to go, regardless of whether they drive. TRU educates, advocates, and mobilizes for more and better public transit and other affordable, sustainable mobility options throughout the Detroit region.

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This report was compiled with the best and most recent publicly available information as of November 2025. While TRU has made every effort at accuracy, we cannot guarantee the information is totally accurate. Please contact us with questions and corrections.

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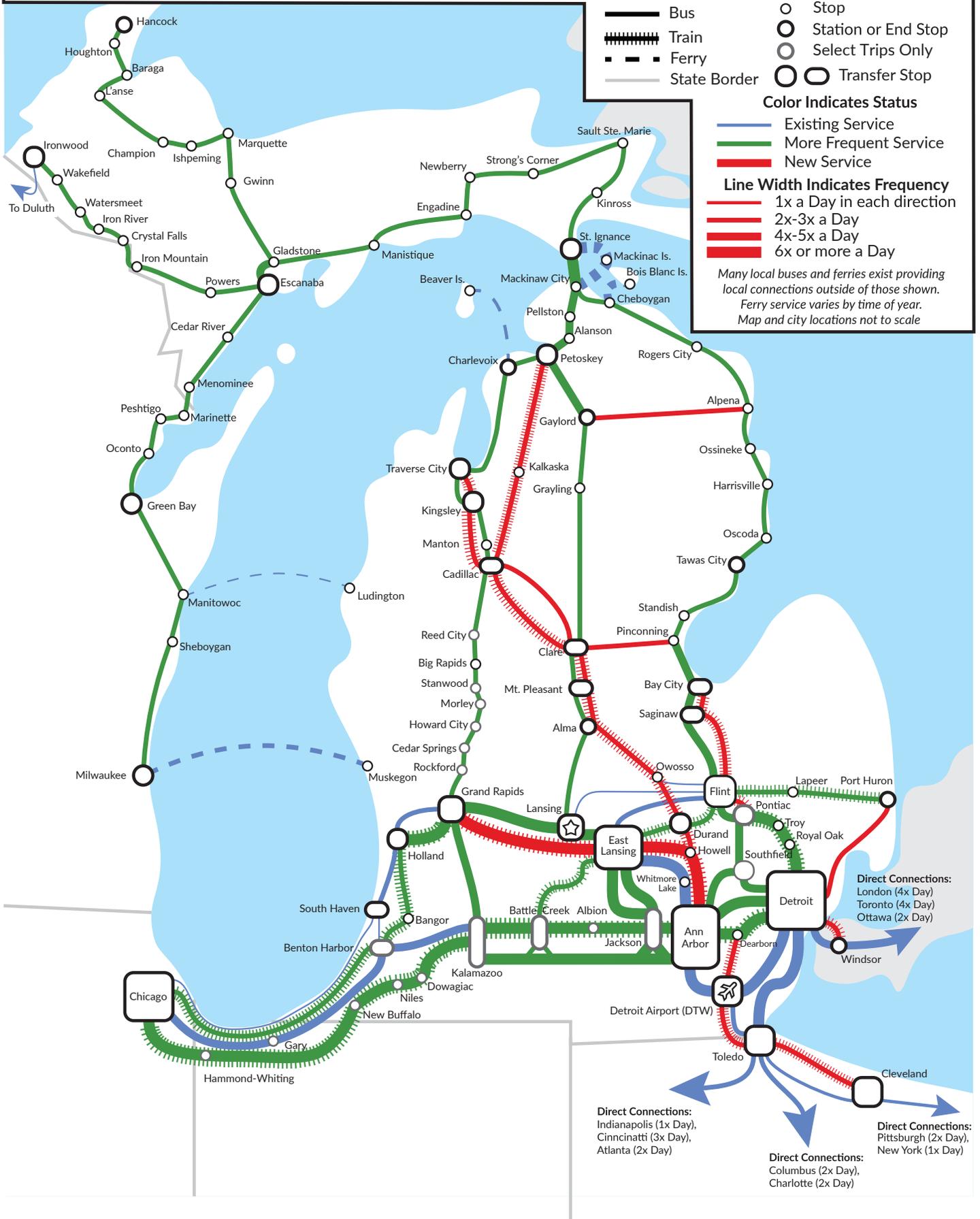
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# What Michigan's Statewide Transportation System Could Be



# Executive Summary

For over 50 years, Michigan has provided modest **intercity bus and train service** to provide residents with affordable transportation connections across and beyond our state.

**These services are well-used, but they are not sufficiently well-developed or convenient to meet our travel needs.** As a result, for most cross-state trips, Michiganders rely on driving and flying.

Longer-distance travel by buses and trains offer a convenient, safe, and cost-effective alternative to travel by air and by car. They are essential for the one in ten adults who do not drive, produce less pollution than other modes, are safer than driving, reduce congestion for drivers along our highways, are popular amongst young people, and give Michiganders the freedom to choose how to travel. Many other states are outpacing Michigan in developing their intercity bus and train systems, and Michigan shouldn't be left behind.

As Michigan families face rising costs, increasing congestion, and climate change, **the state must make a long-term commitment to building a strong bus and train network**, building on the foundation of our already existing services.

## Boosting Bus Service

Increasing intercity bus service is the fastest and easiest way to reconnect Michigan cities. Currently, the **state invests just \$2.6 million a year into operations for intercity bus service**, primarily in rural areas, **just 0.003% of what Michigan spends on roads.** As a result, **bus connections are often infrequent, where they exist at all.** As of 2025, there is not even direct express bus service between Michigan's two largest metro areas: Detroit and Grand Rapids.

Building on the success of publicly supported shorter-distance bus routes, like the Michigan Flyer and D2A2 service, Michigan should invest more in intercity bus service to provide frequent, reli-

able connections between urban regions, as well as more service in rural areas. These services can also help to demonstrate the demand that exists for more rail service between Michigan cities.

## Reinvesting in Rail

In Michigan, unlike many states, most residents already live within easy driving distance of an Amtrak passenger rail station. However, **service on the state's three passenger rail routes is sparse**, with only three daily round trips<sup>1</sup> on the Detroit-Chicago *Wolverine* service and just one daily round trip on the *Pere Marquette* to Grand Rapids and *Blue Water* to Lansing and Port Huron.

Even so, **these services are inadequate to meet existing demand.** 800,000 riders a year already use these services, and the *Wolverine* is regularly sold out. Additionally, **there is no existing cross-state rail service between Detroit and Grand Rapids;** nor north-south rail to Up North destinations; or passenger rail connections between Detroit and the Toledo or Toronto metropolitan areas.

Passenger rail investment is a long-term proposition, but one that will yield significant returns. The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) is already studying improved service on the state's existing rail corridors, as well as new routes. But, the state must boost their investment to improve speed and reliability, and position the state to take the lead in restoring intercity rail service.

## Action Steps

Michigan can take a range of actions towards improving cross-state transit.

The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) contracts with the Owosso-based company Indian Trails to subsidize five different intercity bus routes. **MDOT should allocate more funding**

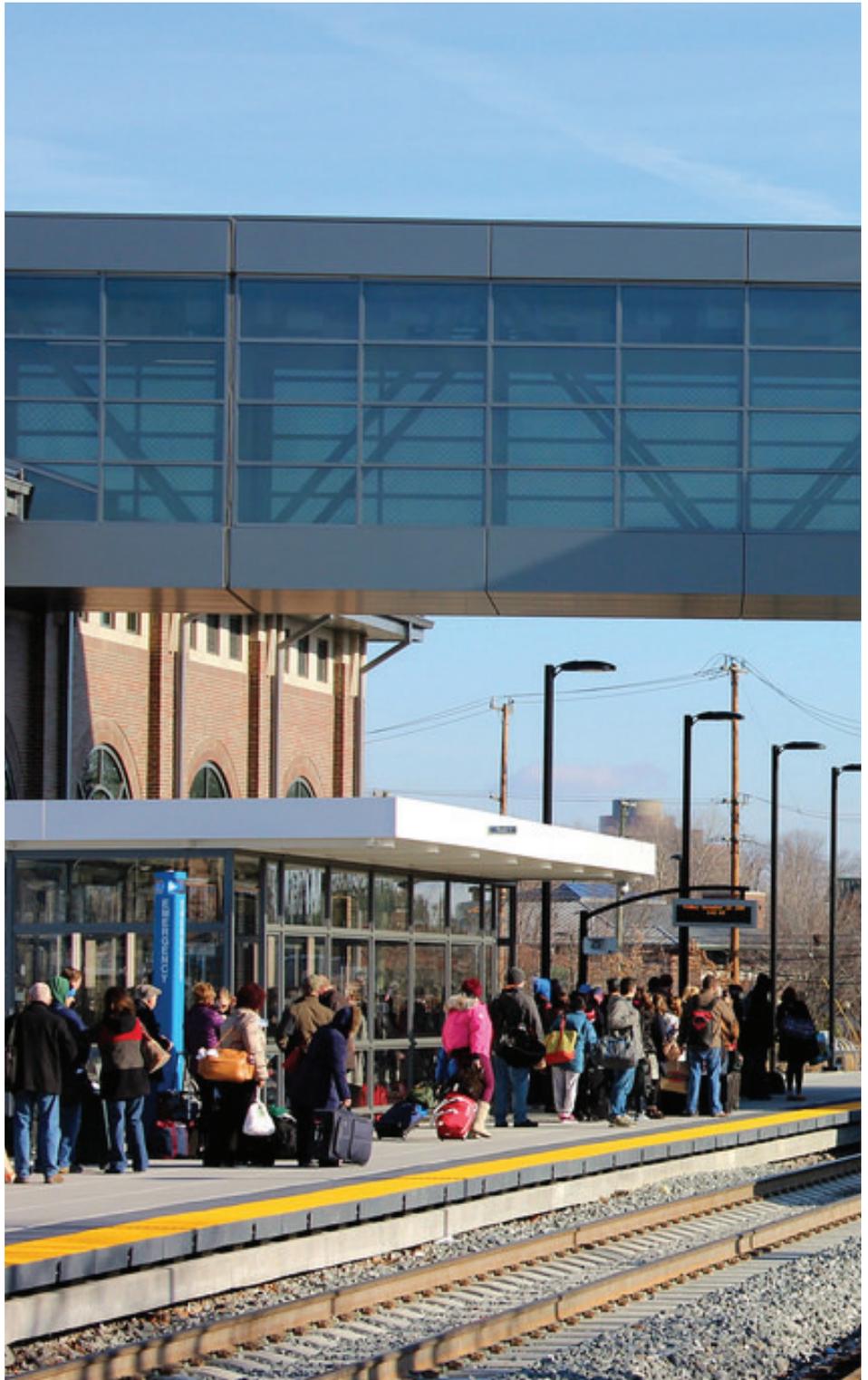
1 For the past few summers, the *Wolverine* has been running a reduced two round trips a day frequency Monday through Thursday due to construction.

to increase frequencies on those routes and to rapidly launch new intercity service between major population centers, like Detroit and Grand Rapids, something which could be accomplished in as little as one year. MDOT should also consider a unified branding (e.g. MIBus) and marketing campaign for state-supported bus routes.

MDOT's Office of Rail is engaged in "Corridor ID" studies for improved service along the state's three existing Amtrak routes, and a fourth study for new "coast-to-coast" service between Detroit and Grand Rapids. The Governor, Legislature and MDOT should commit to allocating additional funding to accelerate the improvement and development of these routes including advanced ordering of equipment and trains.

Although improving bus and train services will require additional funding, it is a small fraction of the \$7 billion in state funds that the state spends annually on transportation. Ultimately, Michigan cannot afford not to make these investments for a more affordable and better-connected state.

“Although improving bus and train services will require additional funding, it is a small fraction of the \$7 billion in state funds that the state spends annually on transportation. Ultimately, Michigan cannot afford not to make these investments for a better-connected state.”



*A crowd waits to board the train at Dearborn station (Prendergast 2020).*

# Introduction

Transportation Riders United (TRU) has historically focused on improving local and regional public transit in Detroit and the greater metropolitan region. However, Michigan is also in need of better options for longer-distance travel within and beyond the state. TRU has prepared this report in an effort to provoke public interest and discussion of how the state can build on its foundation of existing services to provide more intercity or “cross-state” transit options.

For the purposes of this report, **cross-state transit** is defined as public or private, scheduled passenger transportation routes connecting multiple metropolitan regions and open to the public. These include **intercity rail** lines, operated by Amtrak; **intercity bus** services, such as those operated by Indian Trails and Greyhound; and some ferry service across the Great Lakes. All intercity transit options require advanced reservations, whereas anyone can walk on local transit. “Cross-state” and “inter-

city” are interchangeable terms, but cross-state is given preference due to its clear connotations.

In addition to the definitions of intercity rail and bus, a **ferry** was considered intercity if it traveled over a mile across one of the Great Lakes (excluding local service in Ironton, St. Mary’s River, Drummond Island, Little Traverse Bay, and St. Clair River), and didn’t go to a campsite (Isle Royale, North Manitou Island, and South Manitou Island all have ferry service, but don’t have permanent populations).

This report describes the benefits of cross-state transit; Michigan’s cross-state transit history; the existing services available throughout Michigan; success stories in cross-state transit across the country; and steps the state can take to improve its intercity bus and train system.



*Riders boarding an Indian Trails bus (High Speed Rail Alliance 2025b).*



*A young boy points out the window of a Greyhound (Heisler 2019). For many families, intercity bus is the only form of travel available to them, and allows children to see their loved ones.*

# Benefits of Cross-State Transit

Intercity bus and train services have a wide variety of benefits. In addition to providing essential mobility to people who don't want to or cannot drive, they are generally more affordable than driving or flying; produce less pollution and fewer crashes; and are increasingly sought out by young people.

## Cross-State Bus Service is a Lifeline for Rural Michiganders

Thousands of rural Michiganders rely on transit every day, and our cross-state bus network is the only connection these families have to get across the state or to connect to the national transportation network.

The intercity bus service Michigan currently provides is an es-

sential lifeline, given that MDOT reports the average household income of an intercity bus rider was just \$23,000 a year and most had no cars.<sup>2</sup>

Michigan and North Carolina are tied for second in rural transit ridership nationally, with over 4.7 million annual trips.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Michigan provides the most demand responsive rural transit rides in the country.

## Affordable Mobility

Many people across Michigan need affordable ways to get around, especially as many household costs are rising.

Bus service is a cost-effective, accessible method of travel

- 2 Cushman (2025a)
- 3 Mattson and Mistry (2024)

across our state, with bus fares being cheaper than rail or air fare about 75% of the time.<sup>4</sup>

Given that the average American household spends \$13,000 a year on transportation,<sup>5</sup> many people could save a lot of money if they were able to use transit more.

And for most, the largest expense after housing is transportation - with 93% of household transportation expenditures going to buying, insuring, and maintaining cars.<sup>6</sup>

## Climate & Environment

As of 2022, the **transportation sector accounted for 23% of the carbon pollution that contributes to global warming**, overtaking electricity production as the biggest source.<sup>7</sup> As shown at left, however, cross-state public transit options like trains and buses are much cleaner and more efficient than flying or driving.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, areas near high-traffic roadways have higher levels of air pollution than areas far from those roads. Millions of people in the U.S. live or work near busy roads like this,

- 4 USDOT (2024)
- 5 Dickens and Bonina (2023)
- 6 American Public Transportation Association (2023)
- 7 The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2022
- 8 Zheng and Krol (2023)

Figure 4. Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Passenger Transport (Total kg CO<sub>2</sub>e per Passenger by Mode)

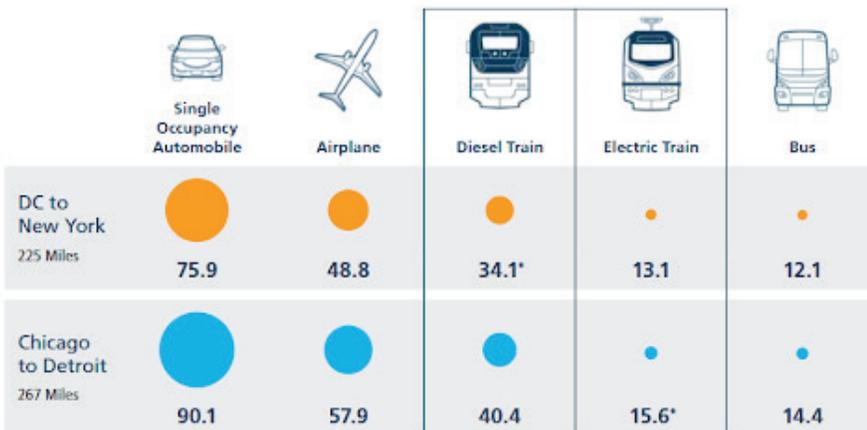


Figure showing greenhouse gas emissions from passenger transportation modes. From Chicago to Detroit, intercity trains and buses have far fewer emissions than flying or driving (Amtrak 2021).

and they experience significantly higher levels of pollution.<sup>9</sup>

## Many Michiganders Don't Drive

One in ten Americans don't drive, whether due to a disability, a legal or financial barrier, or for other reasons.<sup>10</sup> That makes **34 million people who don't drive in the U.S.**

**In Michigan, at least 7% of households do not have a car,**<sup>11</sup> totalling some **70,000 Michiganders** who depend on buses, trains, and other modes for everywhere they need and want to go.

Nationally, one in five older people do not drive, and Michigan is home to an increasingly aging population with thousands of seniors aging out of driving every week. Michigan seniors deserve to be able to age in place with dignity while still getting around.

## Safety

Traveling by intercity bus and passenger rail is much safer than driving, with driving accounting for 94% of all transportation-related fatalities.<sup>12</sup>

In 2024, **over one thousand people tragically lost their lives on Michigan roadways**, a figure that has remained stubbornly consistent for several years.<sup>13</sup>

Passenger rail is, on average, 17

- 9 American Lung Association (2025)
- 10 Schaeffer (2024)
- 11 Schaeffer (2024)
- 12 Metro Magazine Staff (2018)
- 13 Schwab (2025)

times safer than travel by car and buses are ten times safer.<sup>14</sup>

## Reducing Congestion

In contrast to many of our roadways, Michigan's railroads are not at capacity and very few are congested.

Providing more trains can help alleviate congestion on popular travel corridors, and cross-state buses can provide alternatives that will take cars off the road and help reduce congestion.

**Trains and buses are the most space efficient way to move lots of people**, and would improve traffic flow along our congested roadways - benefiting drivers and non-drivers alike.

## Economic Benefits

Outside of the Northeast Corridor, the Midwest has the largest share of Amtrak riders who rely

<sup>14</sup> Matthews (2025)

on trains for school and business travel. **11% of Michigan Amtrak riders said they wouldn't make their trip if Amtrak was unavailable.**<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, it's estimated congestion costs the US economy \$121 billion annually, which both passenger rail and intercity bus investment would help reduce.<sup>16</sup>

Intercity bus and rail investment also produces jobs, with passenger rail investment creating 20,000 jobs per every \$1B invested.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, cross-state transit investment can help spur economic growth by encouraging transit-orientated development near transit centers.

<sup>15</sup> AECOM (2014)

<sup>16</sup> National Association of Rail Passengers (2015)

<sup>17</sup> National Association of Rail Passengers (2015)



*A crowd getting off the train in Kalamazoo, one of Michigan's many college towns (High Speed Rail Alliance 2025b).*

## Cross-State Transit is Popular - Especially with Young People

Nationally, 62 million people take intercity buses and 31 million people ride Amtrak across the USA every year. Millions of people rely on cross-state transit services - and this shows how popular investment in these services is.<sup>18</sup>

**Amtrak found 81% of Americans want their state to invest in passenger rail expansion, with 50% strongly supporting it.**<sup>19</sup>

Cross-state transit is especially important to young Michiganders. In 2022, Michigan had 25% fewer teen drivers than in 2012.<sup>20</sup>

**Transit is incredibly popular with Millennials and Gen Z, many of whom find driving too expensive and too stressful.**<sup>21</sup>

- 18 USDOT (2024)
- 19 Anderson (2023)
- 20 Chernikoff (2024)
- 21 Peaslee (2021)

## Michiganders Deserve the Freedom to Choose How to Travel

Some people just prefer transit over driving, because they can do other things during their trip (such as writing a report on the benefits of cross-state transit), and prefer transit to flying due to the ease of boarding and environmental reasons.

Due to all of these reasons and more, it is essential that Michigan improves and expands cross-state transportation.



*Indian Trails Pure Michigan livery, which used to be used on state sponsored routes (Indian Trails 2014)*



*Interior of Detroit Bus Station, owned by MDOT and leased to Greyhound (Galligan 2019).*



*The historic Pere Marquette 1225 locomotive, used on the old Pere Marquette railroad (Stryker 2025a). The modern day Amtrak Pere Marquette takes its name from the passenger services this railroad operated out of Grand Rapids. This locomotive in particular was the basis for the Polar Express!*

# History of Cross-State Transit in Michigan

## Early History

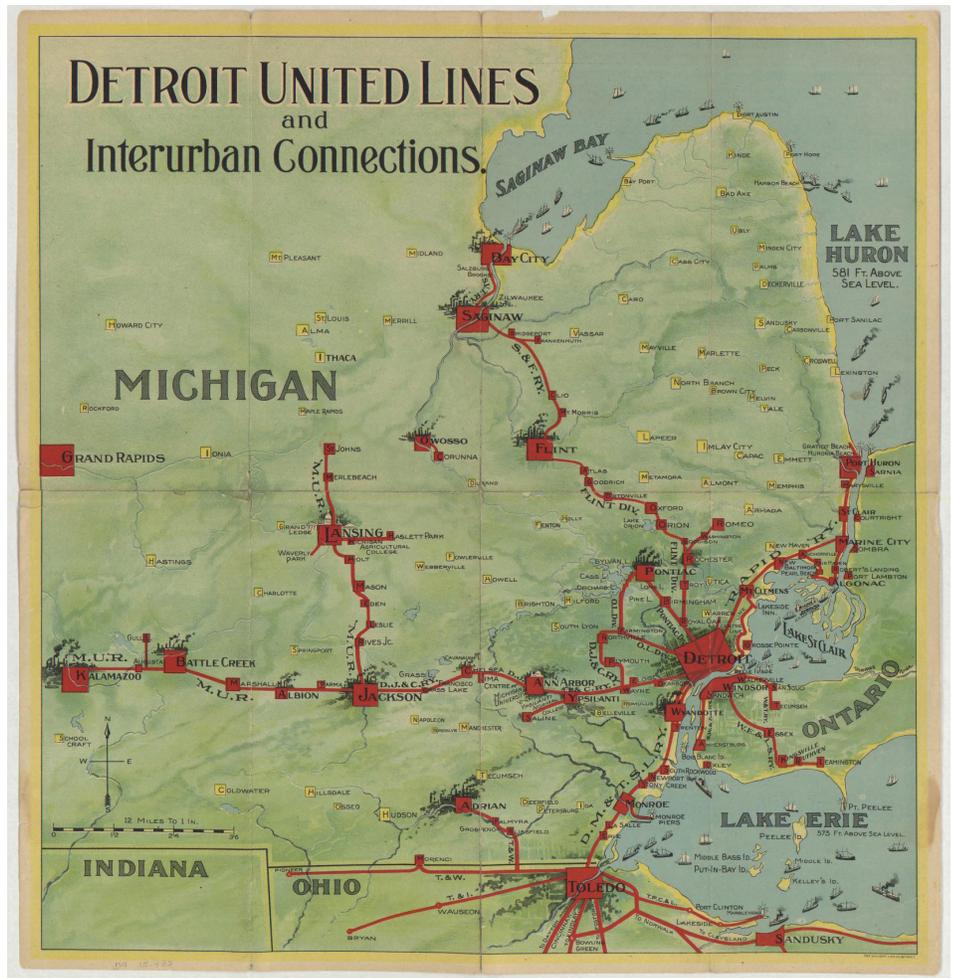
In the early 20th century, Michigan boasted an extensive intercity transportation system. Places from rural farming hamlets to bustling metropolitan cores were connected by a vast network of rail lines, including both regional “interurban” trolleys (as shown at right) and longer-distance passenger trains. These were built by mostly private for-profit companies using loans, selling stock, and land grants, where private companies would get to own the land near railroads. These passenger train routes connected Michigan’s villages, towns, and cities with the entire country, with one-seat trips going as far as the East Coast and Canada.<sup>22</sup>

Concurrently to rail developments, Greyhound expanded bus service across the state during the 20th century, and Indian Trails, founded in 1910 as a rural bus company in Shiawassee County, expanded to provide service across the entire state.<sup>23</sup> Throughout this period, there were countless other intercity bus companies operating statewide, such that Michigan had an extensive intercity bus network serving all but two of the state’s counties through the 1970s.<sup>24</sup>

22 MDOT (2014)

23 Indian Trails (2025a)

24 Michigan Department of State Highways and Transportation 1974



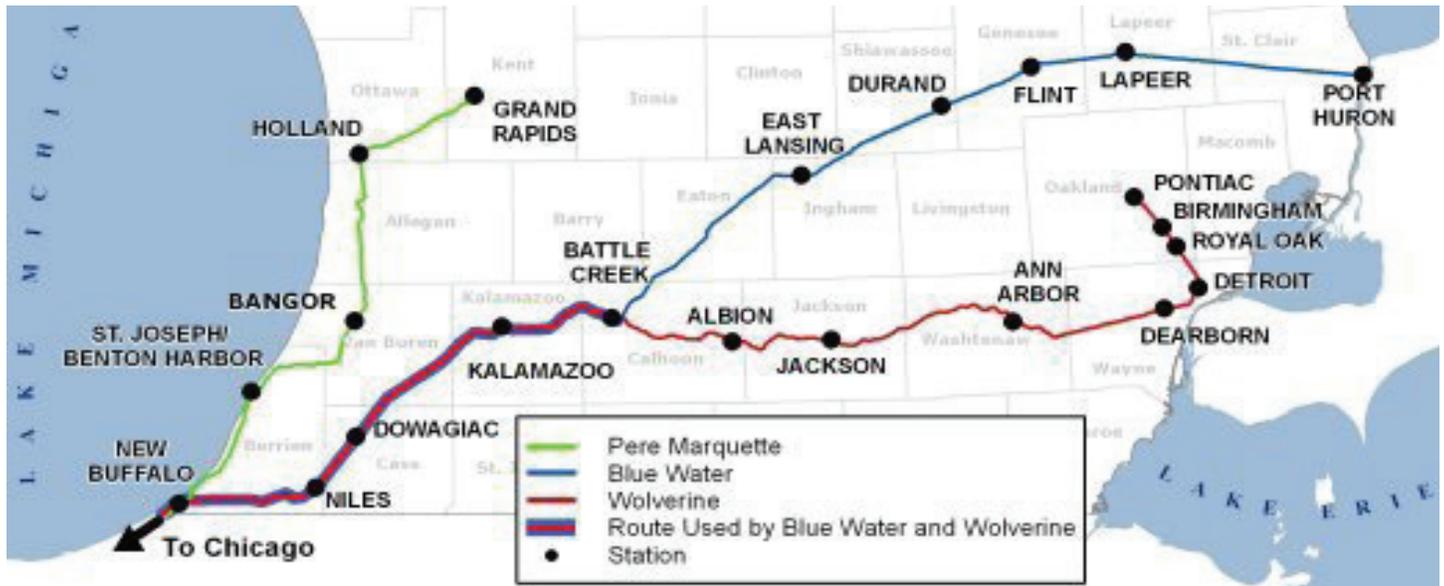
*Detroit United Lines Network, one of the interurban companies that used to operate in Michigan, 1911 (University of Michigan Library 2017).*

Unfortunately, these networks atrophied in the decades after World War Two. As Michigan and the federal government poured trillions in public funds into new interstate highways and airports, other intercity modes of transportation struggled to compete with government-subsidized car and plane travel. The private companies that operated rail lines began to go out of business across the country. While private bus companies held on for a bit longer than their rail peers, the

network had declined from its 1940s peak, and seemed on a path to continue shrinking.

## The State Steps In: Rail Service

To ensure these critical connections continued despite not making a profit, public intervention in the 1970s saved a portion of the intercity transit network from extinction, linking dozens of Michigan’s cities and villages. The federal government created



Amtrak's existing Michigan services (Michigan Association of Rail Passengers (MARP) 2025).

Amtrak as a publicly supported corporation in order to preserve American passenger rail, by running publicly owned trains on privately owned railroad tracks. At the same time, the state of Michigan purchased a number of rail lines around the state and stepped in with subsidies to continue three passenger rail routes, all converging on Chicago: the *Pere Marquette* to Grand Rapids, the *Blue Water* through Lansing to Port Huron, and the *Wolverine* to Detroit and Pontiac.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the three existing routes, the state once subsidized a commuter train from Jackson/Ann Arbor to Detroit. From 1975 to 1984, this ran two times a day as the *Michigan Executive*.<sup>26</sup>

There have been a few changes to Amtrak service in Michigan over the past 50 years. The *Wolverine* ran two trains a day starting in 1971 (when Amtrak was founded) from Chicago to Detroit. A third train was added in 1975.<sup>27</sup> From 1980 to 1995, one of these trains continued from Detroit to Toledo, with the other two extended to Pontiac (their current terminus) starting in 1994, and in 1995, the one *Wolverine* going to Toledo switched to Pontiac.<sup>28</sup> The *Blue Water* began in 1974, and from 1982 to 2004, went beyond Port Huron to Toronto (operating as the *International*).<sup>29</sup> The *Pere Marquette* to

25 MDOT (2014)

26 MDOT (2014)

27 Over their 50 year history, the three *Wolverine* runs have used a variety of other names, including the *Turboliner*, *Saint Clair*, *Twilight Limited*, and *Lake Cities*.

28 MDOT (2014)

29 Sanders (2006a, 203-7)

Grand Rapids began operation in 1984, and has not changed since.<sup>30</sup>

As of 2025, the *Wolverine* operates three round trips each day, while the *Blue Water* and *Pere Marquette* maintain one train a day in each direction. In addition to these routes, Amtrak operates *Thruway* bus services that connect riders with Amtrak stations out of state, such as Toledo, where they can connect with other Amtrak train services.

30 Sanders (2006b, 209)



The *Wolverine* crosses the St. Joseph River near Niles, Michigan, 2009 (Wikimedia Commons 2018).

## The State Steps In: Bus Service

Meanwhile, as the intercity bus network atrophied, the state began providing financial support to a few private, for-profit bus companies in 1976. As opposed to Amtrak's nationalization of rail operations, the "Michigan Intercity Bus Assistance Program" provided operational support to a select few bus routes, with the private companies acting as contractors to operate the bus. The program also provided capital financial support to private companies for acquiring buses and for municipalities to build multimodal transit terminals. In the first two years of this program, 13 intercity routes were supported throughout the state, from rural areas in northern Michigan to urban routes in southern Michigan into Toledo and Chicago.<sup>31</sup>

The operating support program has changed over the years, and by the early 2000s, had become a small allocation of funding for five rural bus routes to preserve connections to the northern Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula beyond. This service took the form of a public-private partnership between the state and the operator, Indian Trails, and the state receives federal matching funds via the Federal Transit Administration (FTA)'s 5311f program for rural intercity buses.<sup>32</sup>

Higher-ridership urban intercity bus routes, such as the Detroit-Chicago corridor, continued to be served by for-profit

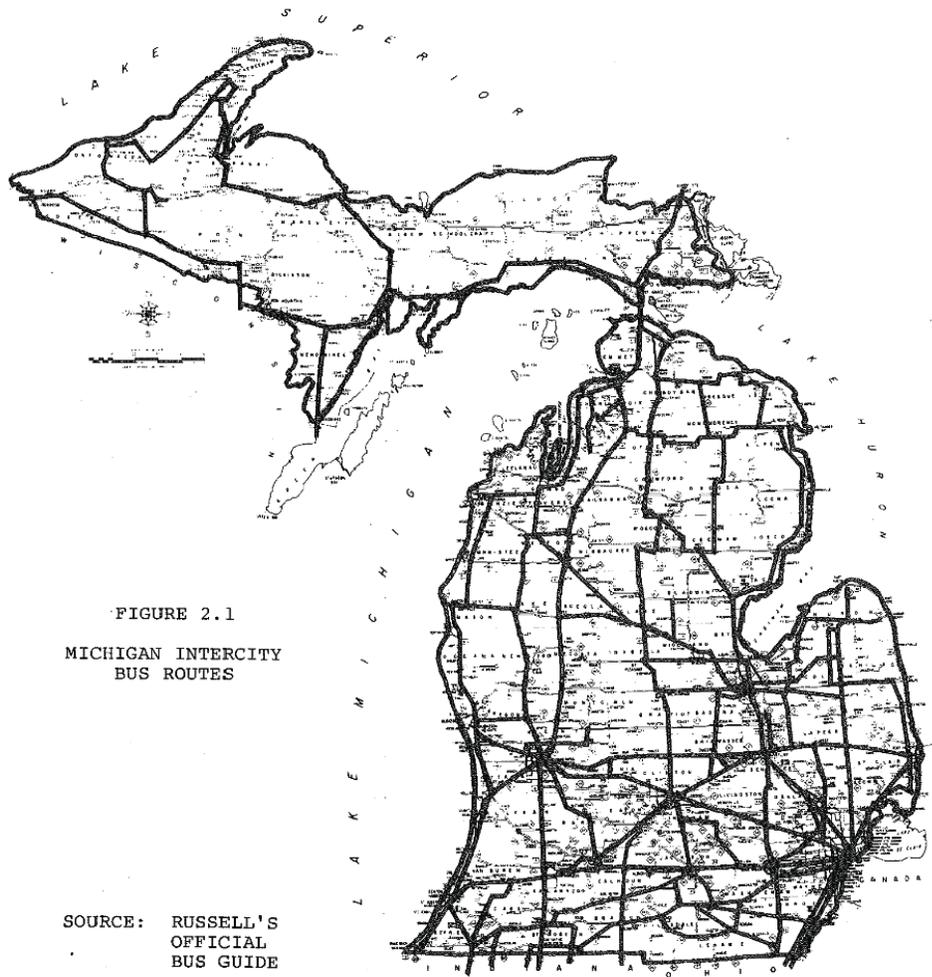


FIGURE 2.1  
MICHIGAN INTERCITY  
BUS ROUTES

SOURCE: RUSSELL'S  
OFFICIAL  
BUS GUIDE

*Michigan's Intercity Bus Routes as of 1974. (Michigan Department of State Highways and Transportation 1974).*

companies, primarily Greyhound, without government support. Megabus, a British discount bus company, began operating routes between Detroit to Chicago and other Michigan cities in 2006,<sup>33</sup> but shut down its Michigan operations in 2017, presumably due to limited profit margins.<sup>34</sup>

While both urban and rural intercity bus routes continue to exist in Michigan, the available routes have greatly decreased since the 1970s. In 1974, there were almost 60 buses a day between Toledo and Detroit.<sup>35</sup> To-

day, that number is 8. While most cities did not have that much service, many routes no longer exist, and many fewer counties have intercity bus service than used to.

31 Taylor et al. (1978)

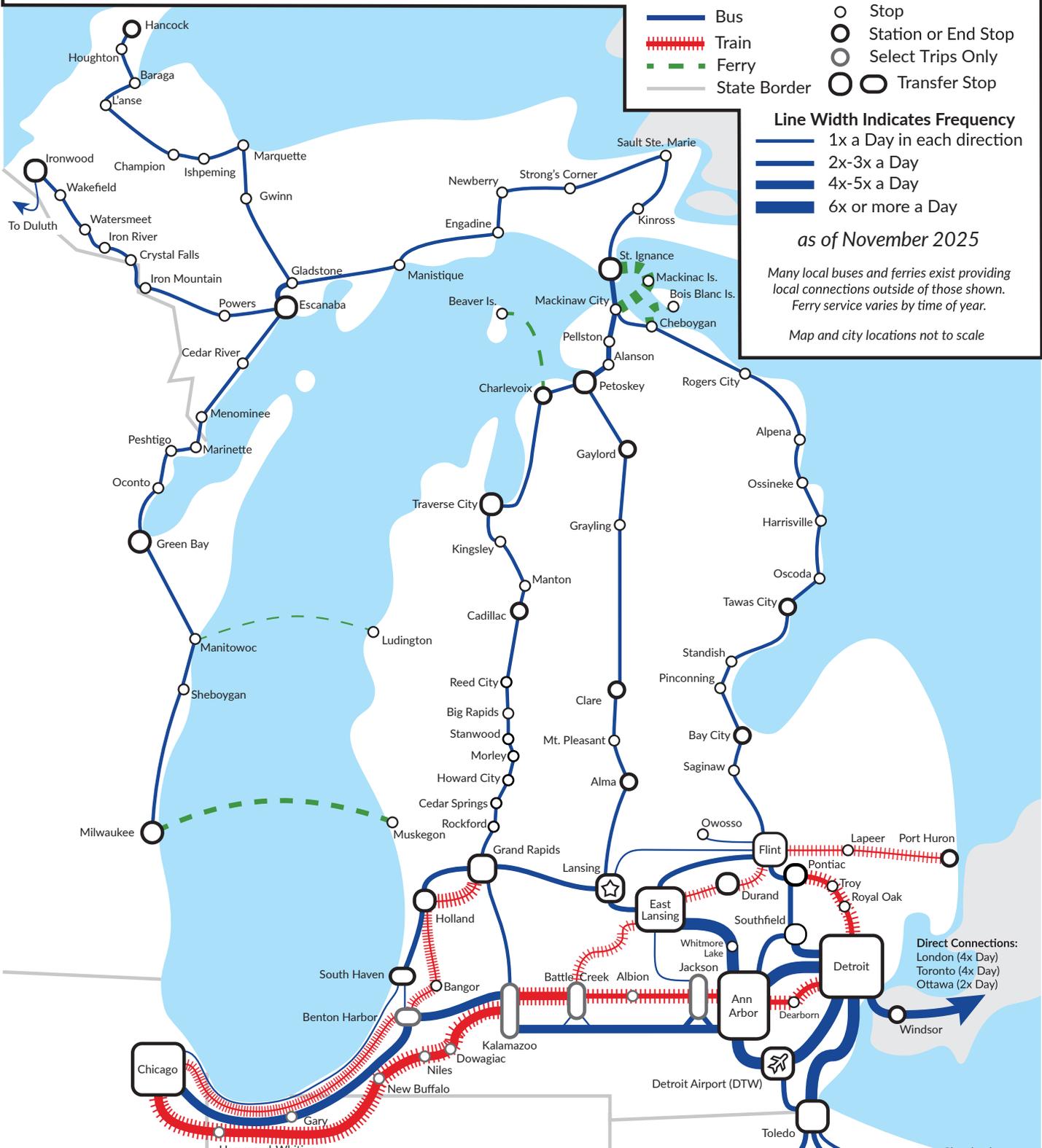
32 FTA (2018)

33 McMillin (2012)

34 Hicks (2023)

35 Michigan Department of State  
Highways and Transportation (1974)

# Michigan's Statewide Transportation System



**Service at ○ Gray Stations (Select trips only stop here)**

Hammond-Whiting	1 eastbound, 2 westbound
Gary	2 roundtrips
Albion	1 roundtrip
Niles	4 eastbound, 3 westbound
Dowagiac	2 roundtrips
New Buffalo	4 eastbound, 3 westbound

One bus a day runs express from Chicago to Ann Arbor, skipping Benton Harbor, Kalamzoo, Battle Creek, and Jackson

**Direct Connections:**  
 London (4x Day)  
 Toronto (4x Day)  
 Ottawa (2x Day)

**Direct Connections:**  
 Indianapolis (1x Day),  
 Cincinnati (3x Day),  
 Atlanta (2x Day)

**Direct Connections:**  
 Pittsburgh (2x Day),  
 New York (1x Day)

**Direct Connections:**  
 Columbus (2x Day),  
 Charlotte (2x Day)

# Existing Services

As of today, Michigan has three cross-state rail lines, and a total of 12 intercity bus routes serving multiple Michigan cities,<sup>36</sup> and 12 bus routes serving only one city in Michigan, but with connections across the country. Aside from these intercity bus routes, some local transit agencies operate regional bus routes that connect outlying rural areas to urban areas and connect multiple metropolitan regions. Important to note as well, **two ferries cross Lake Michigan** between Michigan and Wisconsin, and **regional ferries can be found around the Straits of Mackinac**, in addition to local ferries to campgrounds and on large rivers and small bays throughout the state.

In the 21st century, due to the benefits discussed, the federal government and a growing number of states have ramped up public investment in intercity train and bus services. There is growing awareness that these modes of travel merit substantial public investment, just as roads, highways and airports receive.

36 13 if counting the one Amtrak Thruway bus from Toledo to East Lansing, only for Amtrak ticketed customers.



MDOT's rebuilt Jackson Street rail bridge in Jackson, MI, serving both Amtrak and freight traffic (MDOT 2023).

## Recent Improvements

Over the past two decades, by capturing competitive federal funds, Michigan has made important improvements to its existing Amtrak services, particularly along the Chicago-Detroit corridor. Amtrak and the state of Michigan now own the largest portion of that corridor, from Dearborn to Porter, Indiana. Much of the Chicago-Detroit corridor has been upgraded to accommodate trains traveling at 110 miles per hour, significantly faster than the 79 mile per hour top speed of most Amtrak routes around the country.

Many Amtrak stations around the state have been reconstructed, including those in Grand Rapids, East Lansing, Dearborn, and Troy. A new Detroit multimodal station is being planned as well, and there is a robust network of intercity bus stations provided by MDOT and local partners statewide. Many Amtrak stations are connected to intercity bus stations and local providers, providing convenient multimodal connections.

**Much of the Chicago-Detroit corridor has been upgraded to accommodate trains traveling at 110 miles per hour, significantly faster than the 79 mile per hour top speed of most Amtrak routes around the country.**



The Amtrak Wolverine serving the Dearborn train station, which was rebuilt in 2014 (Stryker 2025c).

## Current Routes

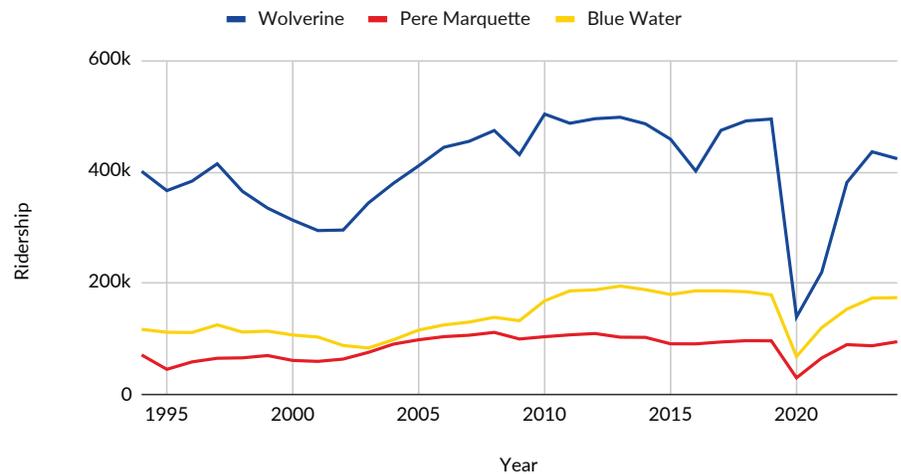
Amtrak ridership in Michigan has increased significantly since the early 2000s, as shown in the chart, topping out at roughly 800,000 riders per year. Since the pandemic, ridership has largely bounced back. Unfortunately, since there is a fixed number of trains each day, and these trains are frequently sold out, there is little room for further ridership growth. Additionally, *Wolverine* ridership has fluctuated in the past few years, as the summer has seen two roundtrips a day instead of three due to construction. State-supported bus routes carried 45,265 passengers in FY 2024,<sup>37</sup> and fully private bus routes carried hundreds of thousands more.<sup>38</sup>

At time of writing, **cross-state bus transit in Michigan is provided primarily by Flixbus/Greyhound and Indian Trails.** Barons Bus provides services between Detroit, Ohio, and Indiana; and Froggy Transportation connects Detroit Metro Airport to Toledo. The only part of this network that is publicly supported is Up North Indian Trails services, with all other bus services being privately funded. There are also high frequency, express regional buses in Southeast Michigan operated by Indian Trails, such as the D2A2 between Detroit and Ann Arbor, Michigan Flyer from East Lansing to Detroit Metro Airport, and the DAX from Detroit to Detroit Metro Airport, all of which are publicly supported by local transit agencies.

37 MDOT (2025d)

38 Cushman (2025a)

## Amtrak Michigan Services Ridership



Amtrak Michigan Services Ridership (MDOT 2025e).

Michigan is also home to multiple ferry services, some of which take the role of cross-state travel. There are four ferry services that receive public operating funds.<sup>39</sup> Two of these operate “intercity” service: the Beaver Island Transportation Authority (BITA), and the Mackinac Island Transportation Authority (MITA), both of which work with private operators to provide ferry services to and from the islands. Frequency varies throughout the year, with Mackinac Island in particular ranging from 3 to 4 daily roundtrips in the winter, and up

39 MDOT (2025b)

to 125 daily roundtrips in the summer.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to the Mackinac Island and Beaver Island ferries, there are two private car ferries across Lake Michigan to Wisconsin, operated by the Lake Express and the Lake Michigan Car Ferry. Both of these are privately owned, operate only one to three times a day, and operate only from May through October. A private ferry also operates from Cheboygan to Bois Blanc Island.

40 Mackinac Island Transportation Authority (2021)



The SS Badger crossing Lake Michigan (Lake Michigan Destinations 2024).

### Amtrak Routes in Michigan

Route	Major Stops	Roundtrips per day	Host Railroads	Funded by
Wolverine	Chicago, Kalamazoo, Ann Arbor, Detroit, Pontiac	3	Amtrak, CN, MDOT, NS, CR	MDOT
Pere Marquette	Chicago, Grand Rapids	1	Amtrak, CN, MDOT, NS	MDOT
Blue Water	Chicago, Kalamazoo, East Lansing, Flint, Port Huron	1	CSX, NS, Amtrak	MDOT

### Intercity Bus Services with One Stop in Michigan

Agency	Route	Roundtrips per Day	Funded by	Notes
Flix	Detroit - Toronto - Ottawa	3	Private	
Flix	Toronto - Detroit night	1	Private	Only operated 5 days a week, over the weekend
Greyhound	Atlanta - Cincinnati - Detroit	2	Private	
Greyhound	New York - Pittsburgh - Detroit	1	Private	
Greyhound	Pittsburgh - Detroit	1	Private	
Greyhound	Detroit - Columbus - Charlotte	1	Private	
Froggy Transportation	Toledo to Metro Airport	3	Private	Only 2 roundtrips on Sundays
Barons Bus	Detroit to Cincinnati	1	Private	
Barons Bus	Detroit to Charlotte	1	Private	
NY Trailways	Toronto -> Detroit	1	Private	
Indian Trails	Ironwood-Hurley-Ashland-Duluth	1	Wisconsin (WisDOT)	

### Intercity Ferries in Michigan

Agency	Route	Roundtrips per Day (avg)	Funded By	Notes
Lake Express	Milwaukee - Muskegon	2	Private	May through October
Lake Michigan Car Ferry	Ludington - Manitowoc	1	Private	May through October
Beaver Island Ferry Company	Charlevoix - Beaver Island	1 to 2	MDOT, BITA, Private	April through December
Plaunt Transportation	Bois Blanc Island - Cheboygan	3 to 4	Private	May through November
Shepler's	Mackinaw City - Mackinac Island	minimum of 6	Private	April through October, service greatly increases during Summer
Shepler's	St. Ignace - Mackinac Island	minimum of 6	Private	April through October, service greatly increases during Summer
Arnold's	Mackinaw City - Mackinac Island	minimum of 6	Private	April through October, service greatly increases during Summer
Arnold's	St. Ignace - Mackinac Island Summer	minimum of 6	Private	April through October, service greatly increases during Summer
Arnold's	St. Ignace - Mackinac Island Winter	3 to 4	MDOT, MITA, Private	Operates through Winter until ice blocks route

*Note: Local river or bay ferries (St. Marys River, Drummond Island, St. Clair River, Little Traverse Bay) and ferries to island campgrounds (Isle Royale, Manitou Islands) are excluded*

### Intercity Bus Services within Michigan

Agency	Route	Roundtrips per Day	Funded by	Notes
Amtrak (Trinity Transportation)	Thruway 6048 & 6049: East Lansing to Toledo via Detroit	1	Amtrak	Only available to travelers on Amtrak rail service
Flix	Chicago - Detroit	1	Private	Only operated 5 days a week, over the weekend
Flix	Chicago - Lansing - Detroit	1	Private	
Greyhound	Chicago - Kalamazoo - Detroit	3	Private	
Indian Trails	Sleeping Bear (Kalamazoo-Grand Rapids-Cadillac-Traverse City-St. Ignace)	1	MDOT, Private	
Indian Trails	Huron (Detroit-Flint-Bay City-St. Ignace)	1	MDOT, Private	
Indian Trails	Straits (Detroit-Ann Arbor-Jackson-Lansing-Clear-Gaylord-St. Ignace)	1	MDOT, Private	
Indian Trails	Hiawatha (St. Ignace-Sault Ste. Marie-Escanaba-Ironwood)	1	MDOT	
Indian Trails	Superior (Milwaukee-Green Bay-Escanaba-Marquette-Hancock)	1	MDOT, Wisconsin (WisDOT)	
Indian Trails	Detroit-Flint-Lansing-Grand Rapids-Kalamazoo	2	Private	
Indian Trails	Michigan Flyer	14	Private, TheRide (Ann Arbor)	
Indian Trails	Detroit Air Xpress (DAX)	16	RTA of SE Michigan	
Indian Trails	Detroit Ann Arbor Express (D2A2)	16	RTA of SE Michigan	Frequency halved on weekends

Tables showing all Amtrak, intercity bus service, and intercity ferry services in Michigan. Data compiled by TRU from the agencies.



*Riders deboarding the Blue Water in Port Huron (AmtrakGuy365 2021). Riders from Port Huron need to leave at 6:20am and arrive at 11:31pm, with no other options. For bus riders in the Upper Peninsula, these schedules are even worse, with buses coming and leaving at 3am in some towns.*

# Challenges in Cross-State Transit

Michigan’s intercity bus and train network serves over one million riders each year, but due to relatively modest state investment, these services have many limitations.

## Limited State Investment

Currently, Michigan invests just \$2.6 million in intercity bus service each year, matching an additional \$2.6 million from the federal government’s 5311(f) program, which supports rural transit needs.<sup>41</sup> The state also provides capital support in purchasing new intercity bus coaches that are used Up North and on routes between Grand Rapids and Detroit and Detroit and Chicago, but these funds are only used when old buses need to be replaced.<sup>42</sup>

As of fiscal year 2025, the state’s passenger rail investment is about \$52 million per year, of which \$28 million goes towards operations, with the rest going to track maintenance, equipment, and capital expenses.<sup>43</sup> Capital expenses are uniquely challenging, as they are mostly funded through federal grants, which must be competed for against other states. In comparison, the federal government’s 5311(f) program for intercity bus service uses “formula funding”, a set percent dollar match that is guaranteed every year, so long as a state meets the requirements. Formula funding is far more reliable

41 Cushman (2025a)  
42 Pearson and Smith (2025a)  
43 MDOT Rail (2025)

than federal grants, and is much quicker to utilize.

By comparison, MDOT’s I-96 “Flex Route” project in Oakland and Livingston County cost a total of \$269 million. State spending on intercity rail and bus service amounts to a tiny fraction, roughly 0.008%, of the \$7 billion in state funds spent on transportation annually.<sup>44</sup>

## Frequent Delays

Due to conflicts with freight rail traffic, long boardings at stations caused by only opening a few doors, Amtrak operational issues, and recent construction, on-time performance is still an issue for Amtrak’s Michigan services. The *Wolverine*, in particular, faces significant delays, with an on-time performance of less than 70 percent.

## Frequency and Timing

Because Michigan’s bus and train services are relatively infrequent, using them is often inconvenient. For example, the lone train from Grand Rapids to Chicago departs Grand Rapids at 6 am, and the return train arrives in Grand Rapids at 11:30 pm. (Grand Rapid’s local transit provider, TheRapid, stops bus service at 11:30 pm as well, leaving train riders stranded with no bus connections). For rural bus riders, that schedule is often worse, such as in Manistique, where the buses arrive at 2:30am and

44 Hamilton (2025)

Train	Host railroads	On-time performance
<i>Pere Marquette</i>	CSX	84.5%
<i>Blue Water</i>	Amtrak, CN, MDOT	75.0%
<i>Wolverine</i>	Amtrak, CN, MDOT	69.6%

Amtrak Michigan Services On-Time Performance (Amtrak 2024a).

3:35am.<sup>45</sup> More frequent services, operating at a wider variety of times, would make bus and train travel more feasible for many more passengers.

The rail network is centered around getting people to and from Chicago, with all three lines terminating in Chicago. Schedules are timed out for travelers to visit Chicago in the morning and return at night as well, which makes in-state travel difficult. For example, the earliest a *Wolverine* rider from Kalamazoo can get to Detroit is 1:30pm, and for same day travel, would have to leave Detroit at 6pm. This is even worse along the one time a day *Pere Marquette* and *Blue Water*!

## Sold-Out, At Capacity Trains

Since there is a fixed number of Amtrak trains each day, and these trains are frequently sold out, there is little room for further ridership growth in Michigan. As with airline tickets, Amtrak prices increase the later they are purchased. On Labor Day weekend 2025, **47.4% of Amtrak trains from Michigan were fully sold out** of coach class seats. A further 18.4% saw tickets of over \$100 due to limited capacity, **meaning 65.8% of trains from Michigan were sold out or had coach tickets at over \$100 on Labor Day weekend** by the Wednesday before Labor Day.<sup>46</sup> Most likely, more of these trains were sold out over the long weekend. On the *Wolverine*, the situation is even more dire. **19 of the 22 Wolverine trains across the long weekend were sold out or had tickets over \$100** by the Wednesday before Labor Day.<sup>47</sup>

Outside of holidays, Michigan trains have major capacity issues. A load factor (the amount of passengers per mile divided by the number of seats per mile) of over 40% on Amtrak indicates capacity shortages,<sup>48</sup> as trains are often sold out at ideal times and days. **All three of Michigan's routes had a load factor over 40% in 2024, meaning they were at capacity.** The *Wolverine* and *Blue Water* both had load-factors of about 55% - the highest in the Midwest, and are amongst the most at-capacity trains in Amtrak's entire system.<sup>49</sup>

45 Indian Trails (2025b)

46 Schwieterman (2025)

47 Id.

48 Id.

49 Id.

Whether on a holiday weekend or an average week, Michigan's Amtrak routes are at capacity. Not adding more trains stunts ridership and makes travel harder and more expensive for Michigan-ers, especially business travelers and people visiting family.

## Difficulty Acquiring Equipment

Operationally, increasing cross-state transit in Michigan is relatively easy, but acquiring new trains and intercity bus coaches is difficult. For trains, it costs millions of dollars for each locomotive and traincar, and there are only two manufacturers in the USA. Michigan must compete for federal funds whenever we wish to acquire more trains, which means making the case for how Michigan would use the new train, arguing it to the federal government, and adhering to their timeline.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, there is a long queue of states demanding new trains, and **it can take over a decade from order placed to order received.**<sup>51</sup>

As for buses, each new intercity bus is purchased using about 80% federal funds and 20% state funds, but buses purchased using federal funds must obey "Buy American" rules. There is currently only one intercity bus manufacturer in the USA that adheres to "Buy American". In the past, the state of Michigan fully funded the capital expenses of purchasing intercity coach buses, meaning this problem wasn't an issue.<sup>52</sup> This drives up the cost and makes delivery times much longer than in other countries.

## Cross-State Bus Travel in Crisis

U.S. cross-state bus travel has been in crisis for some time. Greyhound was purchased by British transportation conglomerate FirstGroup in 2007, and sold to German conglomerate Flix in 2021.<sup>53</sup> Flix did not acquire Greyhound's aging bus terminals, many of which have been sold off for real estate development.<sup>54</sup> In Michigan, fortunately, most intercity bus stops are either owned by MDOT, Amtrak, and individual cities, or privately owned in

50 Anastor and Johnson (2025)

51 High Speed Rail Alliance (2025c)

52 Cushman (2025b)

53 Reuters (2019)

54 Allard (2023)

long term agreement with Indian Trails. Reliable bus stations that provide shelter and adequate facilities to riders are crucial, as many intercity bus riders have hours-long transfers between routes.

Unfortunately, Flixbus tends to add and drop routes with relatively little notice. For example, in November 2024 Flixbus began a route between Mount Pleasant and Detroit.<sup>55</sup> As of July 2025, this route was no longer operating, severing this connection in Michigan's cross-state bus network.<sup>56</sup> Another example comes from Kalamazoo, which had a stop added in early 2022 on a Flix route between Chicago, Ann Arbor, and Detroit,<sup>57</sup> but was soon removed later that year.<sup>58</sup> While new transportation services come and go, the speed and rate at which Flix adds and removes bus service leaves riders stranded, and creates issues for Michigan's entire cross-state bus and rail network as gaps are constantly opening.



*Old Amtrak coach on a train that was stuck in Kalamazoo for over 8 hours overnight on July 21 and 22, 2022. Horror stories like this are rare, but not unheard of on the Wolverine in particular (Frost 2022).*

- 55 Howell (2024)
- 56 Flixbus (2025)
- 57 Miller (2022)
- 58 Schwieterman, Mader, and Woodward (2023)



*Flixbus stop in New York City. Flix has garnered controversy due to using a parking lot with no shelter or seating for their buses, causing issues for local traffic and riders alike (Gallagher 2024).*



*An Indian Trails bus in Flint (Stockrahm 2023).*

# How Cross-State Transit Expansion Works

There are many benefits to expanding cross-state transit, but how do we get there? The process is very different for rail and bus. Intercity rail expansion relies heavily on competitive federal grant dollars, and has much higher capital costs. This results in lengthy study periods and many hours spent on applications competing against other states, resulting in multiyear processes. Intercity bus, by contrast, is funded by the state and relies on contracts with private bus companies to operate the service. As soon as the state appropriates funding for a new route, service can begin within months.



*A crowd gathers to board Amtrak in East Lansing (Greg DeRuiter 2014).*

## Rail - Service Expansion Studies

Rail service expansion is far more expensive than bus expansion. Therefore, before rail service expansion is operational or even funded, a study must be conducted to ensure feasibility, ridership, and options for expansion.

Since 2021, the United States has had a comprehensive planning and development program for cross-state passenger rail service, under the **Corridor Identification and Development Program (Corridor ID)**. In the US, most intercity rail expansion occurs with federal funding support due to high costs. Corridor ID is a grant program that occurs with multiple different “rounds” of applications, with the first round closing in 2023.

There are six steps to the rail expansion process:

1. Scoping
2. Service Development Plan (SDP)
3. Project Development (Preliminary Engineering & NEPA)
4. Final Design
5. Construction
6. Operation

Technically, Corridor ID covers only the first three steps, which are the planning process. Steps four and five are the construction process, and can be

funded via other federal grant programs and state governments. Step six, operation, is when a service is open for the public to use!

Corridor ID is open to state governments, municipalities, transit agencies, Amtrak, or planning organizations. While Corridor ID’s future is not guaranteed, it is expected to continue to be the norm for rail expansion in the US. A major benefit of Corridor ID is that only the first step (scoping) of Corridor ID funding is competitive, meaning that once a project is accepted into the program, it doesn’t have to compete with other projects for funding.

A corridor is eligible for Corridor ID funding if it is one of the following:<sup>59</sup>

- A new intercity passenger rail route under 750 miles
- Enhancement of an existing intercity passenger rail route under 750 miles
- The restoration of service over all or portions of an intercity passenger rail route formerly operated by Amtrak
- The increase of service frequency of a long-distance intercity/passenger rail route.
- Every current proposed passenger rail service

<sup>59</sup> HDR (2023)

in Michigan meets these standards.

In Michigan, three projects were accepted into Corridor ID: All are frequency and reliability enhancements on Michigan’s current Amtrak routes. Additionally, the Ohio DOT (ODOT) had their Detroit-Toledo-Cleveland project accepted, which MDOT is a partner on.

There are two other rail studies occurring in Michigan: MDOT is doing an in-house study on Coast-to-Coast passenger rail, and WexExpress and Groundwork Center are leading a study on North-South passenger rail, with MDOT on their steering committee. While neither of these studies are in Corridor ID, they are being done to Corridor ID specifications so that when another round of funding opens up, the projects can be “fast tracked” through steps one and two. Therefore, the Corridor ID process is a good explanation for all rail studies in Michigan.

Here is a detailed overview of the six steps to ex-

## Step 0: State Rail Plan

pand rail service under Corridor ID.

Prior to the Corridor ID program, there is a step zero: States develop their own regional or state rail plan highlighting their goals. The **Michigan Mobility 2045 (MM2045)** plan is Michigan’s state rail plan, adopted in 2021. The Michigan Mobility 2045 plan mentions the following rail services:<sup>60</sup>

- Improvements and increased frequencies on the *Wolverine*, *Blue Water*, and *Pere Marquette*

60 MDOT (2021)

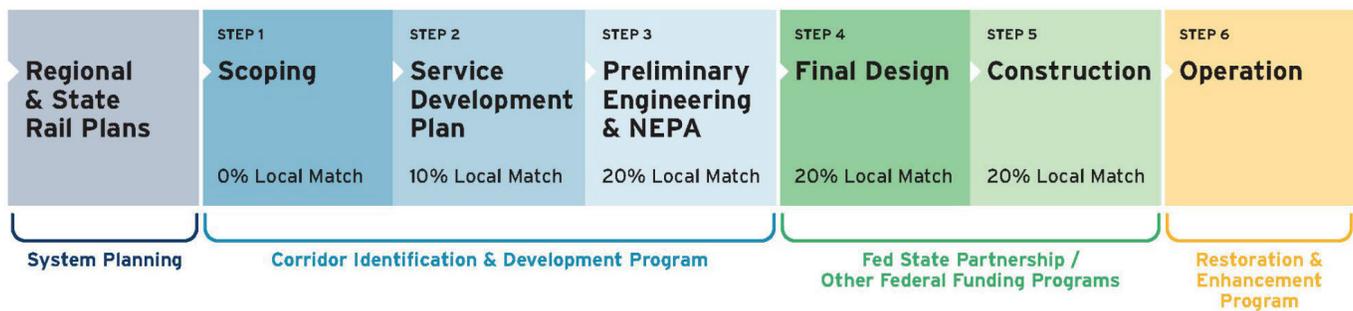
- Detroit-Windsor-Toronto service, including the Wolverine extension to Windsor
- North-South rail (Detroit to Traverse City and Petoskey)
- Detroit-Ohio rail service (Detroit-Toledo-Cleveland)
- Coast-to-Coast rail (Detroit to Grand Rapids)
- Ann Arbor to Detroit commuter rail
- Holland to Grand Rapids commuter rail
- Holland to Grand Rapids to Kalamazoo regional rail

Just because a service is mentioned in the Michigan Mobility 2045 plan doesn’t guarantee adoption, as feasibility studies must be done and funding sources must be identified.

## Step 1: Scoping

Upon acceptance into Corridor ID, the first step is to prepare a scope, schedule, and cost estimates for the project, and gather local resources to continue the process. This step is funded via a \$500,000 grant from the Federal Rail Administration (FRA), and requires no local matching funds to be raised by the local partner.<sup>61</sup> Also, any unused funds from this step can be used for future steps. This step is relatively short, and sets the cost for future steps. This is important since each step after step one requires a local match, in this case from the state of Michigan. MDOT currently expects to be done with this step by Spring of 2026 for their current projects.

61 HDR (2023)



Steps in Corridor ID (High Speed Rail Alliance 2023).

## Step 2: Service Development Plan

The next step is creating a **Service Development Plan (SDP)**. A SDP outlines the detailed steps to making this service a reality. This includes defining the service, analyzing alternatives, identifying required capital projects, establishing a governance structure, financial planning, public engagement, and compliance with safety regulations.<sup>62</sup> The amount needed for this step is determined by step one, and the FRA funds 90% of that cost, with 10% coming from the local partner (State of Michigan). Currently, MDOT expects their SDP's to be done by 2028 for the in-house Coast-to-Coast study, and by 2030 for the existing Amtrak services in Michigan.

## Step 3: Project Development (Preliminary Engineering & NEPA)

The Service Development Plan includes a compilation of projects that are needed to make the service a reality, including new stations, track upgrades, and purchasing new equipment. This step completes the preliminary engineering, environmental reviews (NEPA), and other documentation necessary for all these projects. This step is funded based on the amount set in the scoping set, with 80% coming from the FRA and 20% coming from the local partner (State of Michigan). This is also the last step covered by the Corridor ID program. While some large projects will require the full SDP for project development to occur, MDOT plans on advancing near-term projects for their current Amtrak routes into project development and construction (steps 3 through 5) during 2027 and 2028.

## Step 4: Final Design

**Step three is the final step of the planning process, and step four marks the start of implementation.** Final design marks when a project is advanced to be ready for construction. This includes final review of engineering documents, ensuring compliance with any environmental reviews, updating the cost, management plan, and performing the procurement process for construction. This step is funded outside of Corridor ID through the federal - state partnership, or other federal funding pro-



Construction along the tracks in East Lansing (McDowell 2008).

grams, and requires another round of application to competitive federal grants.

## Step 5: Construction

Construction covers building the infrastructure for the rail service, including capital construction on stations, procuring trains to run the service, testing equipment, and any other final steps to implement it. If approved, construction is also funded 80% by the FRA and 20% by the local partner, and is outside of Corridor ID.

## Step 6: Operation

Finally, the service is operating and people are using it!

Most expansion of rail service requires going through the federal Corridor ID program due to the high costs of rail infrastructure. Additionally, while Michigan has an extensive freight rail network, most of it must be upgraded to allow for passenger rail speeds, and improvements must be made like new stations and acquiring trainsets on multi-year backlogs. The implementation of a new rail service is a multi-year process, with the Corridor ID process (steps one through three) taking the better part of a decade alone.

For a more comprehensive overview of the steps for rail projects, please refer to the FRA's Guidance on Development and Implementation of Railroad Capital Projects.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> All Aboard Ohio (2023)

<sup>63</sup> FRA (2025)

## Bus Service - State Investment

In contrast to rail service, bus service expansion is very straightforward. If the state allocates new funding for a cross-state bus on a certain corridor, the MDOT Office of Passenger Transportation will figure out the optimal routing and stops. Then, they'll put the contract to operate the route out to bid for private intercity bus companies, like Indian Trails or Greyhound. The top bidder will be selected to operate the service, and service will start up very soon.

Rail service usually takes multiple years to implement due to the many layers of federal requirements and large capital projects. However, since only the state is concerned with intercity buses, and since buses operate on existing highways, it can take less than a year from appropriation of funding to service implementation, as long as the carrier has enough buses and drivers to operate the route.



An Indian Trails bus wrapped in the "Pure Michigan" livery, which was formerly used on state supported routes (Indian Trails 2014).

# The Path to a Competitive Cross-State Transit Network: Case Studies

To compete with other states and provide easier cross-state travel for Michiganders, Michigan must invest more in its intercity bus and train network. The state should improve service on existing routes, increasing speed and reliability and adding more trains and buses to serve growing demand. It should also begin the process of planning new rail routes, while launching additional bus services to demonstrate the market that exists for these connections. Investments by other states provide useful models for Michigan.

## Wisconsin: *Hiawatha's* Frequent Service and Airport Connection

A train service called the *Hiawatha* has existed since 1935 between Chicago and Milwaukee, and has been an Amtrak route since 1971. Frequency fluctuated in the *Hiawatha's* early history, but stabilized at six trains a day in 1991,<sup>64</sup> with the Milwaukee to Chicago corridor being supplemented by some long distance routes as well. The entire train ride is only 90 minutes from Milwaukee to Chicago with three intermediate stops, one of which is at Milwaukee airport, providing a fast, frequent train connection between downtown Milwaukee and

64 Sponholz (2011)



Amtrak Hiawatha (Amtrak Hiawatha 2019).

the airport.

The *Hiawatha* is completely supported by the state of Wisconsin, and has the highest ridership of any Amtrak route outside of the Northeast Corridor at 665,000 passengers in 2024. This is almost as much as all three Amtrak routes in Michigan,<sup>65</sup> and the *Wolverine* alone carried 425,000 passengers in 2024.<sup>66</sup>

The *Hiawatha* accomplishes this high ridership number – the seventh highest in the Amtrak system – with seven round trips per day between Milwaukee and Chicago.<sup>67</sup> The *Wolverine* achieves its yearly ridership with only three trains per day. Imagine what could be accomplished with four round trips in a day, or five, or six, or however many Michigan is willing to fund. More daily round trips means more passengers get where they need to be.

## Minnesota: Unprecedented ridership success

In 2024, Amtrak launched its *Borealis* service between Chicago and Minneapolis/St. Paul via Milwaukee. The *Borealis* is a once a day train funded by the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin, providing a daytime connection between Milwaukee and Minneapolis - previously, travelers would need to ride the train in the middle of the night.

The *Borealis* was projected to carry 124,000 passengers in its first year.<sup>68</sup> After beginning service in May of 2024, the *Borealis* carried 100,000 passengers by October of the same year.<sup>69</sup> The *Borealis* ended up carrying 205,000 passengers in its first year, almost twice the projected number and tri-

65 Amtrak (2024b)

66 Id.

67 WisDOT (2025)

68 WisDOT (2021)

69 Harlow (2024)

pling Amtrak ridership between Chicago and Minneapolis.<sup>70</sup> The Borealis shows that even on a corridor with existing service, a more optimal schedule can provide dramatic increases in ridership beyond expectations, something that could easily be applied to Michigan's Up-North buses in the middle of the night, or Michigan's trains to Chicago that require leaving at 6am and getting home at midnight.



A Virginia Breeze Coach (Cline 2024).

## Virginia Breeze & Amtrak Virginia: Bus and rail working together

In 2021, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam announced a \$3.7 billion passenger rail expansion, which included a \$525 million purchase of private railroad tracks.<sup>71</sup> This agreement was made possible by splitting the cost between Virginia, Amtrak, and regional partners. With this money, Virginia began work to **double frequencies** between Richmond (Virginia's state capital) and Washington, DC from **five to eleven Northeast Regional trains a day**. Eventually, there will be a train every hour from Richmond to DC.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, a second train was added between Washington DC and both Roanoke and Norfolk, resulting in a 20% increase in ridership (despite the pandemic) between 2019 and 2022.<sup>73</sup>

70 Groth (2025)

71 Martz (2019)

72 Id.

73 Woods and Romero (2022)

Ridership on Amtrak Virginia routes has increased every year post COVID, and has even rebounded to 125% of 2019 ridership.<sup>74</sup> Part of this success can be attributed to the creation of the **Virginia Passenger Rail Authority (VPRA)** in 2020, creating a dedicated body to oversee Amtrak service in Virginia. All rail staff are part of this authority and it oversees funding, sustaining, and expanding rail service in Virginia.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, since 1992, Virginia has had a **Department of Rail and Passenger Transportation (VDRPT)**, completely separate from the Virginia DOT (VDOT).<sup>76</sup> A major benefit of having a dedicated rail authority and department of passenger transportation is having a champion for passenger rail and intercity bus in the state government, as the heads of VPRA and VDRPT have more power than MDOT's Office of Passenger Transportation and Office of Rail.

Virginia's massive state-supported rail expansions have shown that riders are demanding more service, that creative funding mechanisms can be used to finance rail expansions that benefit everyone, and the importance of having a dedicated agency supporting rail expansion.

Supplementing Amtrak Virginia is the **Virginia Breeze**, an intercity bus service with four routes. Each route is once a day, 365 days a year, and the program started in 2017. Its annual operating cost is \$3.2 million, and provides bus service to 8,000 passengers a month as of March 2025,<sup>77</sup> or about 100,000 a year. Virginia Breeze uses unified branding and publicly attaches the state's name to the service, helping inspire rider confidence and ease of use.

Half of the Virginia Breeze ridership comes from one route - the Valley Flyer, connecting Virginia Tech to Washington DC. The Virginia DOT has touted their three other routes as successes as well, as the state prioritizes connecting rural and economically depressed areas with no other transit connections to the rest of the state (much like Michigan's Northern Indian Trails routes).<sup>78</sup> All four of these routes serve towns with no Amtrak

74 Virginia Passenger Rail Authority (2025)

75 Virginia Passenger Rail Authority (2020)

76 VDOT (2025)

77 WSLs 10 (2025)

78 McLeod (2025)

service, and provide vital East-West connections that supplement Amtrak Virginia’s primarily North-South service. Virginia Breeze is even set to open a new route in the next year - the Tidewater Current, starting in Norfolk and connecting to the other routes, closing a key gap to Southeast Virginia and allowing travelers in Central Virginia to travel East-West without going through Washington DC.<sup>79</sup> Virginia Breeze also partners with the North Carolina DOT (NCDOT) to continue their routes into North Carolina, allowing for better connections over the state lines.

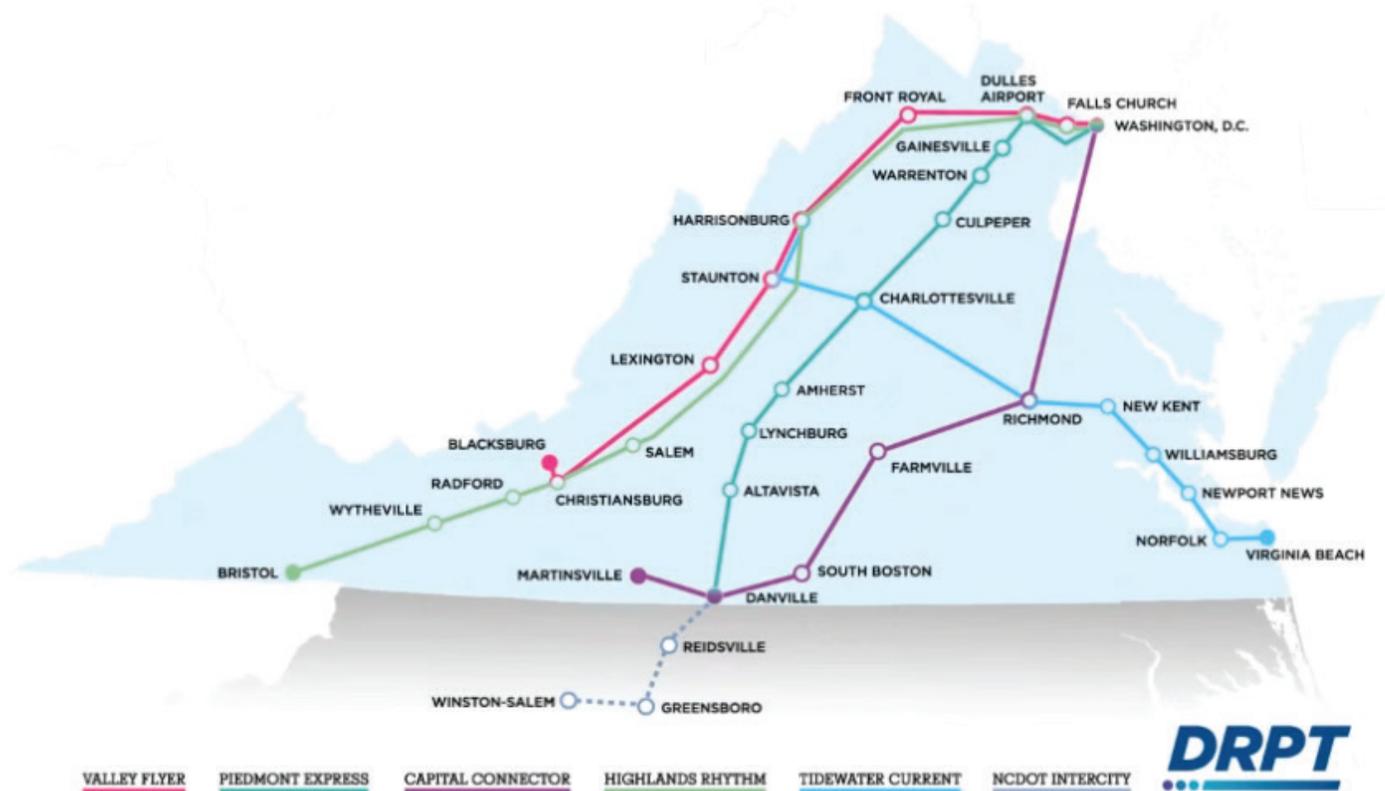
Virginia Breeze has put a lot of effort into upgrading their bus stops throughout the state. VDRPT is currently inventorying all Virginia Breeze bus stops across the state. Currently, most stops have a shelter and parking, but VDRPT plans to make all bus stops ADA accessible, add shelters where missing, and improve local multimodal connections. All bus riders deserve a dignified place to wait, and by increasing local transit and multimodal connections,

79 Schwieterman et al. (2025)

VDRPT is ensuring travel along Virginia Breeze is easy and convenient, and this shows in the ridership: **Virginia Breeze has been a major success amongst young people** who increasingly don’t have drivers licenses or cannot afford a car,<sup>80</sup> a population Michigan has been desperate to keep.

**Virginia Breeze shows the importance of treating rural transit routes as a valid, dignified way to travel.** Unified branding and including routes in higher ridership markets, such as between big cities and university towns, and connecting these routes to the rail network create an easy experience for the rider. It’s important these stops are dignified across the state, from Greyhound terminals in large cities to rural bus stops on the side of the road. Finally, Virginia Breeze’s success has been possible due to the dedicated Department of Rail and Passenger Transportation championing Virginia’s cross state transportation network.

80 Id.



Virginia Breeze Routes, with the soon to launch Tidewater Current and NCDOT connections (Schwieterman et al. 2025).

## Colorado's Bustang: America's Largest Public Intercity Bus Network

The largest and most successful state intercity bus system in the country is Colorado's Bustang program. Launched in 2015 with three primary routes, it has since expanded to include seasonal tourist and student shuttles, six rural connector routes (called "Outrider") throughout Colorado, and higher frequencies on the three primary routes. Initial ridership projections for the first year were 15,000 riders- instead, the service attained 100,000 riders, and has since grown to **over 300,000 annual riders**.<sup>81</sup> Bustang's annual operating cost is \$10M, with farebox recovery at 30% of the cost.<sup>82</sup> **This leaves the state to pay just \$7M annually for the best intercity bus service in the country.** Because of this, Colorado has the highest rural transit ridership in the country, with over 17 million annual rural transit trips, and 11 million of these coming from fixed route buses.<sup>83</sup>

A large component of Bustang is its unified brand. Bustang references popular state symbols, and the State of Colorado puts their name on Bustang, providing confidence for riders. There is one unified ticketing app for all Bustang services, and the Colorado DOT (CODOT) does occasional fare discounts to encourage people to try the service. This gives riders confidence in the system, and helps fight the stigma intercity buses have in the USA. There is precedent for this in Michigan, with the RTA of SEMI's successful D2A2 and DAX bus, and Indian Trails Michigan Flyer service.

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A Bustang Coach (Bustang 2022).

bus, and Indian Trails Michigan Flyer service.

Bustang is the only publicly owned intercity transit service - most are operated on contract by a private company, such as Michigan's current arrangement with Indian Trails. But in Colorado, CODOT owns the vehicles. Bustang has its own assistant director as a division of CODOT Bus and Rail, giving the program a dedicated advocate, helping spur its success. Bustang shows that intercity bus services can be some of the best ways to travel, as long as the state supports the service with branding, marketing, a dedicated champion, and financial support. **When intercity bus is given the chance, it flourishes.**

## Washington and Oregon: The Original Public Cross-State Bus Programs

Travel Washington and Oregon's POINT Cross-State bus network have both been in operation since 2007 and 2009 respectively, and represent some of the first examples of the modern state-supported intercity bus network.

Travel Washington began in response to cuts by Greyhound that would have left many communities in rural Washington without intercity transit connections,<sup>85</sup> with four routes established between 2007 and 2010. **Travel Washington pioneered**

85 WSDOT and Transpo Group (2025)

81 High Speed Rail Alliance (2025a)

82 McLeod (2025)

83 Mattson and Mistry (2024)

84 Brey (2025)

many parts of modern intercity bus travel, such as the unified branding scheme, using FTA 5311f funding, and operating under a public-private partnership. Recently, Washington DOT (WSDOT) completed an Intercity Bus Study in 2024 with the aim of expanding the system.<sup>86</sup> As part of this study, WSDOT inventoried each stop in the state and recorded what facilities and amenities exist, paving the way for better bus stops statewide.

Oregon's POINT started as a gap-analysis study to serve an underserved region of Oregon, resulting in one route in 2009. Eventually, three other routes that started under Oregon DOT's Rail Division to support Amtrak rail service were moved to operating under POINT.<sup>87</sup> Oregon POINT acts as a supplementary service to existing private intercity bus routes and Amtrak routes, creating a disconnected network in the state to rural areas that can't justify Amtrak or private bus service. In fact, the Cascades bus route runs along the same route as the Amtrak Cascades train, giving more frequency to the corridor and connecting some towns that

86 WSDOT (2025)

87 ODOT (2025)



Travel Washington's Grape Line bus (Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) 2007).

don't have a train station.<sup>88</sup>

Both Travel Washington and POINT show a limited series of unconnected routes supplementing the existing cross-state transportation system, focused on providing service to underserved rural communities. Both services have stood out from the beginning by the extensive branding used, including line names related to the state, websites, bus wraps, and marketing by the state. Additionally, Travel Washington has unified bus ticketing with Greyhound/Flix and Amtrak, providing for easy ticketing no matter how you're traveling.<sup>89</sup> And while they are operated on contract,<sup>90</sup> the states get to decide the schedules and operation details for the contract. MDOT can learn many valuable lessons from WSDOT: The keys to a successful state supported intercity bus program include branding to build local support amongst communities and to fight the stigma intercity bus has, and to work with neighboring states to provide connectivity beyond the state line.<sup>91</sup>

## California: Amtrak Thruway Buses and Multimodal Transportation

California has many transit lessons Michigan can learn from, especially with their centrally planned cross state transit system, but a unique lesson from California comes via Amtrak Thruway Ticketing.

Amtrak provides bus connections via Amtrak Thruway, connecting cities across the country to the Amtrak rail network that doesn't have a train station. Unfortunately, Amtrak requires riders to ride the train for at least a portion of their trip to buy a ticket, so there are no bus only Amtrak tickets - except for in California. In Michigan, this is usually a minor inconvenience, as five of the six Amtrak Thruway bus routes are the state supported Indian Trails routes, which riders can purchase tickets from Indian Trails on. However, there is one daily Thruway bus that is only open to Amtrak passengers, and connects East Lansing, Ann Arbor, Detroit, and Toledo.<sup>92</sup> While just one route, it would be very easy for the state to allow any passengers

88 POINT (2024)

89 Schwieterman et al. (2025)

90 ODOT (2025)

91 Schwieterman et al. (2025)

92 Korell (2025)

## North Carolina: NC by Train & Michigan's Rural Ridership Peer

North Carolina has some of the highest rural transit ridership in the country due to its cross-state bus network, and has seen dramatic increases in Amtrak ridership and frequency since the year 2000. North Carolina is an excellent peer for Michigan, as a state with a similar population in an area close to the size of the Lower Peninsula, with major cities of its own located near some of the largest metropolitan areas in the country.

In 2009, the Amtrak *Wolverine* carried 444,127 passengers. The Amtrak *Piedmont* between Raleigh and Charlotte carried 68,427 passengers.<sup>95</sup> By 2024, the *Wolverine* carried 425,832 passengers – a slight decrease – while the *Piedmont* carried 360,655 passengers – an increase of over 281,000.<sup>96</sup>

The key to the increase in *Piedmont* ridership is the number of trains available to passengers every day. In 2009, the *Piedmont* ran only one train a day while the *Wolverine* ran three trains a day. By 2024, while the number of *Wolverine* trains in a day has stayed the same, *Piedmont* round trips increased from one to four.<sup>97</sup> The stagnant *Wolverine* ridership can be attributed to trains constantly running at capacity with none added in over 30 years. If the *Piedmont* could improve so much with more frequency, imagine what would be possible for the *Wolverine*, or Michigan's currently once a day *Blue Water* and *Pere Marquette*.

Beyond the high ridership on the *Piedmont*, North Carolina's state support Amtrak model is unique. NCDOT runs the "NC by Train" brand to market all train service in the state, and NC by Train handles most of the marketing and operations for both of the state's supported routes (*Carolinian* and *Piedmont*). NC by Train sets the *Piedmont* schedules, owns the *Piedmont* trains, publishes paper schedules, and has its own help line for all routes.<sup>98</sup> This high level of involvement, marketing, and unified state branding makes NC by Train much more

95 Progressive Railroading Editorial Staff (2010)

96 Amtrak (2024b)

97 NCDOT (2023)

98 McKinney (2018)



RABA bus on the Chico to Redding route. RABA uses low floor buses instead of high floor buses for this route (Vasek 2024)

on this route, not just those transferring to an Amtrak train.

In 2019, California enacted a law that allowed Amtrak to sell bus-only tickets, and encouraged Amtrak to launch their own bus-only ticketing service, as long as the government works with a private bus company to prove there is an underserved need in that market.<sup>93</sup> The Redding Area Bus Authority (RABA), which helps oversee the Amtrak *Goldrunner* (*San Joaquins Service*), has used this to provide a twice daily bus connection between Chico and Redding, as an extension of the *Goldrunner* from Sacramento. This bus service connects an underserved connection and benefits both bus and train passengers, and the major success of this route has led RABA to consider extending the route. Because ticketing is open to anyone, this route is interlined with Greyhound/Flix as well, meaning anyone can buy tickets from Greyhound, Amtrak, or RABA for this route.<sup>94</sup>

Michigan should pass a law allowing Amtrak Thruway bus only tickets to be bought via Amtrak, and should push for interlining between Indian Trails, Greyhound/Flix, and Amtrak, allowing tickets to be bought on any platform, making the experience easier for riders. Finally, RABA has done a lot with local transit connections via Amtrak Thruway as well that should be studied.

93 Schwieterman et al. (2025)

94 Id.

recognizable and improves the customer experience far more than most Amtrak routes. In contrast, Amtrak handles marketing and operations for Michigan's three Amtrak routes, and while MDOT owns some equipment with Illinois and Wisconsin, all three states let Amtrak handle operations and maintenance.

North Carolina and Michigan both have the second highest rural transit ridership in the country, and while most of Michigan's ridership is from our extensive on-demand rural services, North Carolina's is primarily from its extensive cross-state bus network. **NCDOT subsidizes eleven bus routes**, on contract with Greyhound and local providers.<sup>99</sup> By contrast, Michigan only subsidizes five bus routes with operating costs.

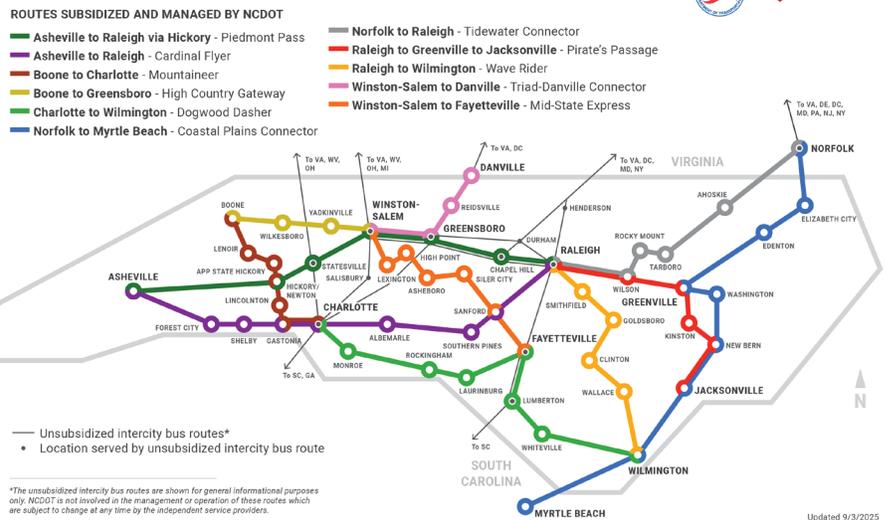
While these buses don't have direct branding, some routes have a pamphlet that publicly attaches NCDOT's name to them and provides info on the entire network.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, NCDOT makes sure their schedules align with the Virginia Breeze to provide easy transfers to neighboring Virginia. **North Carolina's system is also actively expanding, with the most recent route being created this year<sup>101</sup>.** While other systems offer a more premium experience, NCDOT still actively supports its extensive subsidised intercity bus network through schedule coordination, information, and expansion, all things Michigan could learn from.

99 NCDOT (2025)

100 NCDOT and Sunway Charters (2025)

101 NCDOT (2025)

## Intercity Bus Service in North Carolina



NCDOT's eleven publicly funded Cross-State bus routes. Compare this to the five that Michigan supports (NCDOT 2025).



NC by Train locomotive, owned by NCDOT (NC by Train 2024)

# What Michigan's Statewide Transportation System Could Be



# Vision: Improved Cross-State Transit

Michigan needs to enhance both cross-state bus and rail service concurrently. Both provide similar benefits, but differ in cost to implement, timeline, and operation. Rail service can be much faster, convenient, and comfortable than cross-state bus, but bus is much more flexible, inexpensive (for riders and the State), and faster to implement, as all the state needs to do is develop a service contract and select the best provider that applies. Therefore, the **state must adopt an integrated plan to improve both rail and bus services.**

**Michigan needs to treat public transportation with the same respect highways and cars have.** MDOT should adopt a unified brand for cross state transportation options, advertise these services to potential riders, and provide for easy and unified ticketing across multiple platforms. Many intercity bus stops in Michigan have indoor waiting areas and parking, but the state must invest in ru-

ral bus stops as well, providing a dignified waiting spot for all riders. These steps have been crucial to the success of intercity bus programs in Colorado, Washington, Oregon, and Virginia. These are small investments compared to MDOT's annual budget, but go a long way for cross state bus riders.

There are a variety of specific routes Michigan is currently studying or considering. The state should fund these proposals, and consider other ideas as well.



Wolverine cross the Rouge River (Stryker 2024).

## Enhancing Cross-State Bus Service

### Grand Rapids-Detroit Cross-State Bus Line (Coast-to-Coast)

One of the largest gaps in Michigan's cross-state transit system is between Detroit and Grand Rapids, with there being only one daily direct roundtrip between the two cities operated by Indian Trails. However, this route takes almost double the amount of time as driving due to it going through Pontiac and Flint, and makes a day trip between the two cities impossible. This also makes day trips impossible from Detroit to Lansing - unless you only need to spend two hours in Lansing! A bus route between Detroit and Grand Rapids would provide an incredibly high return on investment for the state. **Six daily roundtrips with a stop in Lansing would only cost the state about \$3.8M/year to operate** for 365 days a year (Assumes fare box



Group at Grand Rapids' Rapid Central Station, where local and intercity buses stop (MLive/The Grand Rapids Press 2020).

recovery of 20%. Capital cost for new buses would be \$3.5M up-front, and \$500K a year to maintain) and could be implemented as soon as next year.

## Petoskey/Traverse City-Detroit Bus Route

While rail between Petoskey and Detroit is being studied, implementing it would take years. In the meantime, a bus service could be implemented by the state to supplement the existing North-South bus routes already supported, to prove ridership for rail service, and to give transit riders an option for travel between Michigan's largest city and tourist destination immediately. This service could operate as a seasonal service for cheaper costs, or could serve as a year-round service for all types of riders. If implemented, **this service could cost about \$3.2M/year a year for three round trips a day**, 365 days a year (Assumes fare box recovery of 20%. Capital cost for new buses would be \$2.8M up-front, and \$400K a year to maintain).

## New East-West Up North Connections

A major gap exists for riders in the Northern Lower Peninsula. Riders have options to get downstate or to the UP, but have no East-West options that don't go through Mackinac City or the Grand-Rapids, Lansing, Flint corridor - a gap of over 200 miles, and travel that can take over 12 hours. There are various places where this gap could be plugged, such as near Mt Pleasant or Gaylord, and all would save riders multiple hours. **Any of these routes**

**could run three roundtrips a day at about \$1.2M/year** (Assumes fare box recovery of 20%), and could be scheduled to connect with the North-South services, providing a convenient connection for Up North travelers that wouldn't mean sacrificing a day to travel what is an hour's drive.

## Federal Matching Dollars on New Service

All of the estimated costs for these new bus routes do not account for the FTA's 5311f rural transit funding program. **Under 5311f federal matching funds, if any route qualifies, the state would only have to pay 50% of the operating costs, and 20% of the capital costs** - greatly reducing costs! It's highly likely that at a minimum, the Up North sections of these routes would qualify, as the current state supported bus routes North of Grand Rapids, Lansing, and Bay City receive 5311f matching funds.

## Increasing Existing Up North Frequency

Michigan's five state-supported bus routes Up North are a lifeline for rural riders. This vital service is unfortunately incredibly difficult to use, as most buses run through the middle of the night to align their schedules with transfers downstate. Additionally, these routes stop at numerous small towns between larger destinations. While it's important these towns have connections, it can lead to the time to travel between major cities being double that of driving. **The state should double Up North**



Map at Indian Trails Bus Station in Clare, showing routes Indian Trails used to serve. The state should work to bring many of these back (Batterman 2025).



Chartered Amtrak Thruway Bus, like those used on the route from East Lansing to Toledo (Amtrak 2025a).

**service** on these routes from one to two buses a day at least, giving riders an option during daytime, and should **consider an express bus service between cities Downstate and major destinations Up North** that would provide a fast alternative to local service.

### Amtrak Thruway Bus Only Trips

Amtrak provides *Thruway* bus service in Michigan to connect riders Up North and to Toledo from Detroit, where rail connections don't exist. Of the six *Thruway* buses in Michigan, most of them are just regular Indian Trails routes that any rider can take, but there is an East Lansing to Toledo route operated solely by an Amtrak contractor.<sup>102</sup> Due to Amtrak policy, you cannot buy a bus only ticket on Amtrak, which makes travel unnecessarily complicated. **MDOT and Amtrak should work to include all regular intercity bus routes in Michigan in the Thruway network** for a unified ticketing system, and adopt policies to allow bus only trips to be booked via Amtrak to make travel easier for rid-

102 Korell (2025)

ers. Additionally, some cities allow *Thruway* connections to local transit options.<sup>103</sup> MDOT should work with local transit agencies in cities and counties with Amtrak stations to adopt agreements for joint-ticketing with Amtrak, to make the last mile problem easier for travelers.

### Future Improvements

Outside of these routes, the state should have long-term plans on how to improve Michigan's cross-state bus network, to provide more connections to rural Michigan towns, increase frequencies between our largest cities, and improve stations for passengers waiting on transportation statewide. Such routes could include Toledo-Detroit-Flint-Bay City; Sarnia-Port Huron-Detroit-Toledo; South Bend-Kalamazoo-Grand Rapids; Toledo-Ann Arbor-Flint; rural connections to the Thumb and Lake Michigan shore; and supplanting rail service along the *Wolverine*, *Blue Water*, and *Pere Marquette* with bus service. These should all be part of the Michigan Mobility 2045 plan.

103 Capitol Corridor (2023)

# Improve Existing Rail Services

Michigan should continue to invest in improvements to its three existing Amtrak routes, as these rail tracks are already fit for passenger service and ridership exists along these routes.

MDOT is currently studying these under the federal Corridor ID program. The main goals of these studies are to improve reliability and to double service on each Michigan Amtrak route - bringing the Pere Marquette and Blue Water to two round trips a day, and Wolverine to six. A secondary goal of the Wolverine study is to see if a rail connection to Canada is feasible, by rerouting at least one train to go to Windsor instead of Pontiac. These studies are currently underway with federal support, with the Service Development Plan (SDP) for each route expected to be done in 2027, 2030 at the latest.<sup>104</sup> Once these SDPs are done, MDOT will begin engineering work to start construction shortly after.

Additionally, while Michigan's Amtrak routes are reaching capacity, this is limited to travel to Chicago. The state has done a poor job promoting Amtrak service within Michigan, especially in comparison to states like Wisconsin, Virginia, California, and North Carolina. **MDOT should advertise Amtrak for travel to destinations in Michigan** - especially on weekdays, and for travel in Eastern Michigan, where seats are usually open due to the high

104 Anastor and Johnson (2025)

passenger volumes in Ann Arbor and Kalamazoo.

Michigan has a unique rail advantage that many states don't: MDOT owns the rail corridor between Dearborn and Kalamazoo, and Amtrak owns the rest from Kalamazoo to Portage, Indiana. This is the single largest publicly owned rail corridor in the country, outside of the Northeast Corridor. This means that MDOT doesn't need permission from freight railroads to run trains between Dearborn and Portage, and the rail corridor from Dearborn to Pontiac is far less congested than the Chicago to Portage corridor (the South of the Lake corridor). **MDOT should purchase train cars to run more frequency from Kalamazoo to Detroit** as soon as possible, to make intrastate travel far easier. The only barrier to running more service on this corridor is having those train cars.<sup>105</sup> MDOT should also work to extend these trips to Pontiac, and consider if connections into Southwest Michigan and Northern Indiana are viable.

MDOT recently made a webpage where you can learn more about improvements along existing corridors, and learn about the Coast-to-Coast rail plan as well.<sup>106</sup> Learn more by searching for Michigan Passenger Rail Future from MDOT!

105 Anastor (2025)

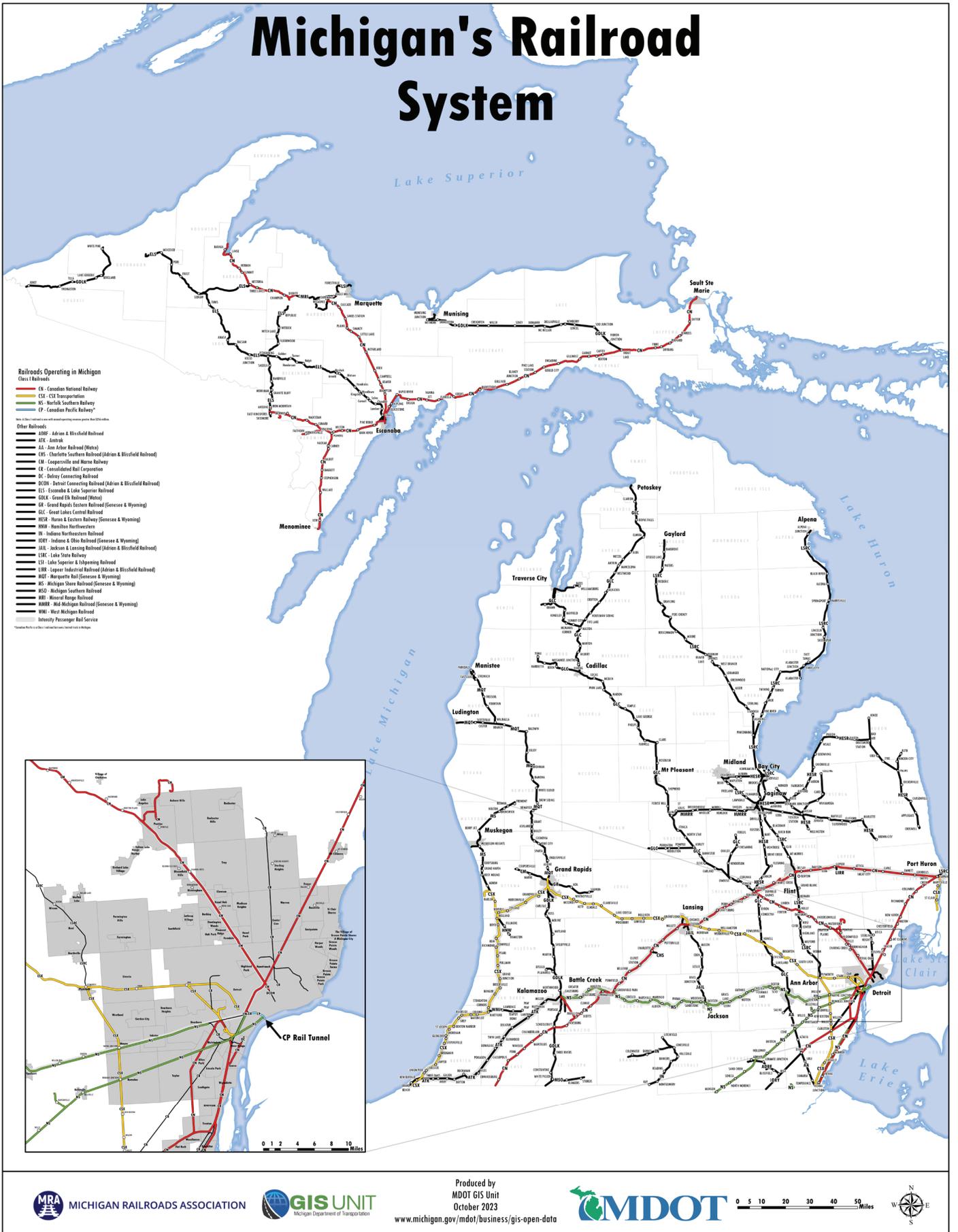
106 MDOT (2025c)



Train at Grand Rapids Station (Sekeet 2021).



# Michigan's Railroad System



Michigan's currently existing railroad map. Passenger rail on these routes - like Coast-to-Coast service between Detroit and Grand Rapids - would require no new right-of-way (MDOT GIS Unit 2023).

## Coast-to-Coast Passenger Rail

Rail service between **Grand Rapids, Lansing, and Detroit** existed until 1971, but currently no direct passenger rail service exists between these three cities. As mentioned above, this is a major gap between Michigan's two largest metro regions.

However, a proposal exists to solve this issue: "Coast-to-Coast" passenger rail, connecting Detroit and Holland via Grand Rapids, Lansing, Jackson/Howell, and Ann Arbor. This rail line would be an eco-friendly ribbon of steel that would connect the state's largest economies, generating countless dollars of economic development while helping Michigan meet its climate commitments. Hundreds of thousands of passengers a year are projected to use the train if it's built<sup>107</sup> – so, what are we waiting for?

Currently, **MDOT is studying this project in-house**, in conjunction with the Corridor ID studies on the three Amtrak routes in Michigan. This study is currently in the early stages, but should have some preliminary results by the end of 2026 and a full **Service Development Plan by about 2028**.<sup>108</sup> While this study doesn't have federal funding at-

107 Transportation Economics and Management Systems, Inc. (2015)

108 Anastor (2025)

tached to fully implement it, MDOT is undertaking the Coast-to-Coast study with a plan to apply to a future round of Corridor ID. Since the study is already completed, MDOT could skip the early stages and fast track implementing a Service Development Plan, meaning the project could be built on a faster timeline than other Corridor ID projects.<sup>109</sup>

**This plan could also continue outside of Corridor ID if the state approves funds for it.**

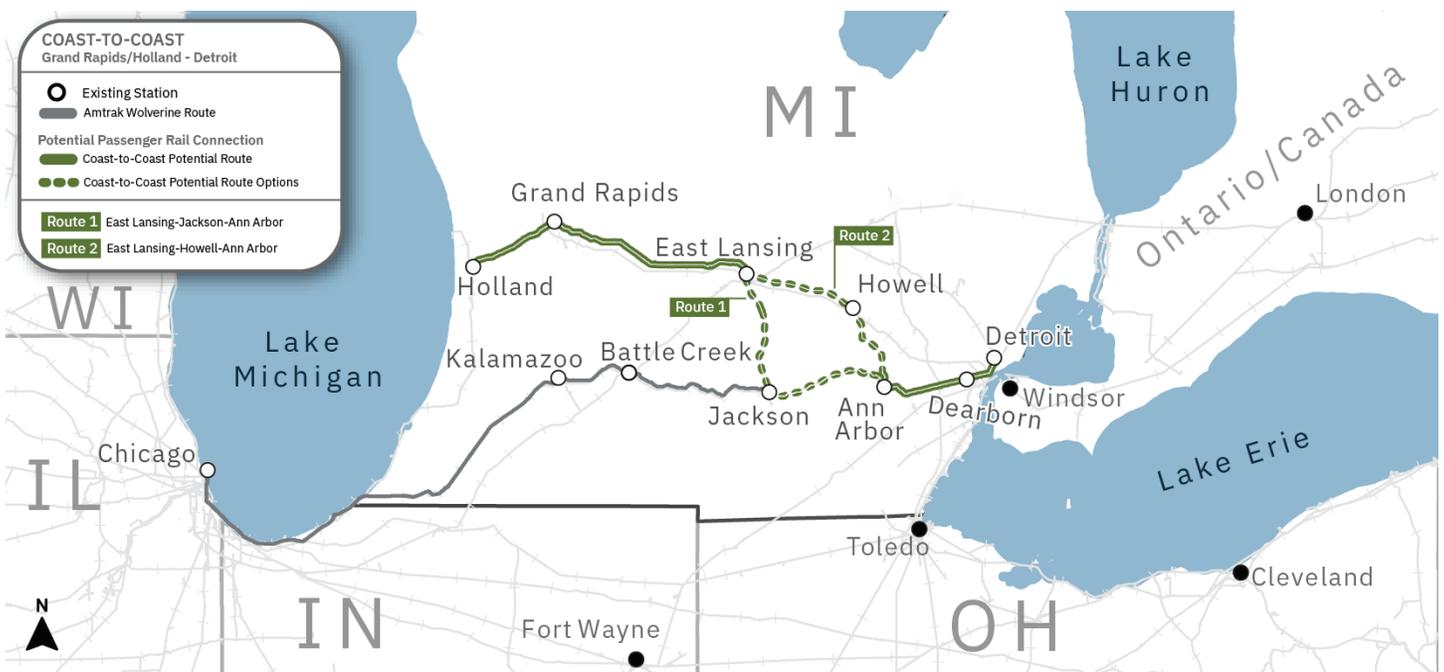
## North-South Passenger Rail

North-South Passenger Rail has been actively discussed by policymakers, journalists, and the general public since the Groundwork Center (a Traverse City based non-profit focused on creating a better Michigan by economic investment, environmental protection, and better transportation) first published an initial cost<sup>110</sup> and feasibility study with the Bay Area Transportation Authority (BATA) in 2018.<sup>111</sup> Previously known as Ann Arbor to Traverse City (A2TC), the plan has since been extended to **Detroit and Petoskey**, and is going forward with the North-South Passenger Rail branding.

109 Anastor and Johnson (2025)

110 This cost estimate is from 2018, and Groundwork Center will likely have an updated cost estimate in early 2026.

111 Transportation Economics and Management Systems, Inc. (2018)

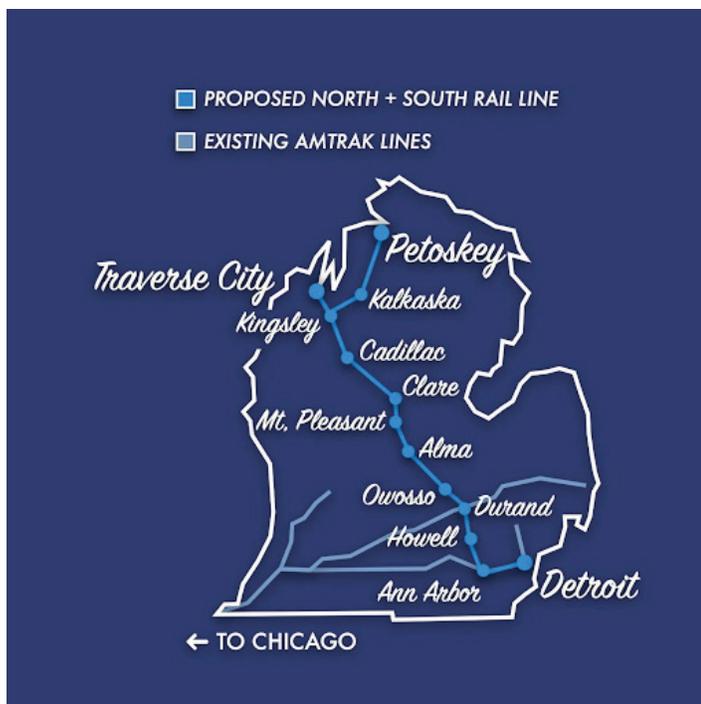


Map of proposed Coast-to-Coast rail service MDOT is studying (MDOT 2025a).

The proposed service would bring a litany of benefits to all portions of the Lower Peninsula. Michigan's tourist industry would immensely benefit from connecting the Southeast to the Cherry Capital – with stops in important towns and cities in between. Tourists who travel up north will now have a more comfortable and seriously competitive alternative to driving or flying. Not only will it benefit the third of people in Michigan who come from no or single car households, **a competitive rail option will mean less congestion on our state's north-south highways and freeways.** North-South rail means an immense benefit to the economy of Northern Michigan.

Not only will the service benefit tourists and visitors, but it will have a tremendous impact on the quality of life for residents and businesses at both ends of the line and everywhere in between. New economic opportunities will be opened up thanks to the creation of this service. Long car commutes between regional centers can now be replaced by productive and comfortable rail travel. This service would be a major boon for our state's economy, **connecting some of our state's flagship universities and major regional jobs centers.**

Groundwork Center and WexExpress (the Cadillac/Wexford Transit Authority) are going forward



Proposed North-South Rail Map (Groundwork Center 2024).

with the project, and they are currently gathering feedback and conducting a year long study to figure out how to make North-South Passenger rail a reality.<sup>112</sup> While MDOT is not leading this study, the project has been mentioned in the state's Michigan Mobility 2045 plan,<sup>113</sup> MDOT is on the steering committee for the project, and WexExpress has received federal and state grants for the study.<sup>114</sup> Additionally, the Corridor ID template has been used for North-South Passenger Rail, and the partners will likely work on a Service Development Plan, to be used for future Corridor ID funding, much like Coast-to-Coast rail.

## Toledo and Cleveland Service

From the 1930s to the 1950s, private rail service existed between **Detroit, Toledo, and Cleveland**, known as *The Mercury*. Since that time, two of the Midwest's largest cities haven't had direct rail service, with passengers on rail having to take a bus to Toledo, and wait for a train to come at either midnight or 3am.

This train would operate on existing railroad tracks and provide a major connection between Detroit, Toledo and Cleveland. **Additional stops could include Detroit Metro Airport** - providing the first rail connection between Detroit and the airport - and **Sandusky**, and the service could be extended **north to Pontiac**.<sup>115</sup>

This project is being **studied by the Ohio Rail Development Commission with MDOT as a partner.** The Detroit-Toledo-Cleveland rail study was accepted into Corridor ID and is on the same timeline as the three Michigan projects, with the Service Development Plan expected to be completed between 2027 and 2030.<sup>116</sup>

## Windsor Wolverine Connection

As mentioned above, part of the Service Development Plan under Corridor ID for the *Wolverine* is looking at rerouting one train a day to Windsor in Canada. This would likely be timed to allow for

112 Ulstad and Goldman Brown Jr (2025)

113 MDOT (2021)

114 Ulstad and Goldman Brown Jr (2025)

115 Burke (2023)

116 Anastor and Johnson (2025)

Chicago to Toronto travel in a day, with a transfer directly at Windsor Station to Canada's VIA Rail. However, the *Windsor Wolverine* shouldn't come at the cost of decreasing Detroit to Pontiac service.

## New Orleans and Long-Distance Routes through Michigan

In contrast to the other routes discussed, the Federal Rail Administration (FRA) proposed a long distance Amtrak route between Detroit and New Orleans via Columbus, Cincinnati, Louisville, and Nashville as part of its Long-Distance Service Study completed in 2024.<sup>117</sup> Since this would be an Amtrak long distance route, it would be funded fully by the federal government. However, this study proposed over a dozen routes, and only two were selected as new routes to be implemented. The Detroit-New Orleans route was not selected for further study in Corridor ID, and there is currently no funding mechanism to support the implementation of this route.<sup>118</sup>

Outside of this route, the federal government and Amtrak are not studying any Long-Distance routes

117 USDOT and FRA (2025a)

118 Id.

through Michigan, and there is no plan to implement the Detroit-New Orleans route. Additional long distance routes could support Michigan's statewide network, such as a train route to Florida (Detroit Metro Airport's top two destinations are Atlanta and Orlando),<sup>119</sup> or better connections further east past Cleveland. However, any of these ideas would require federal funding and support, and are currently not under serious consideration.

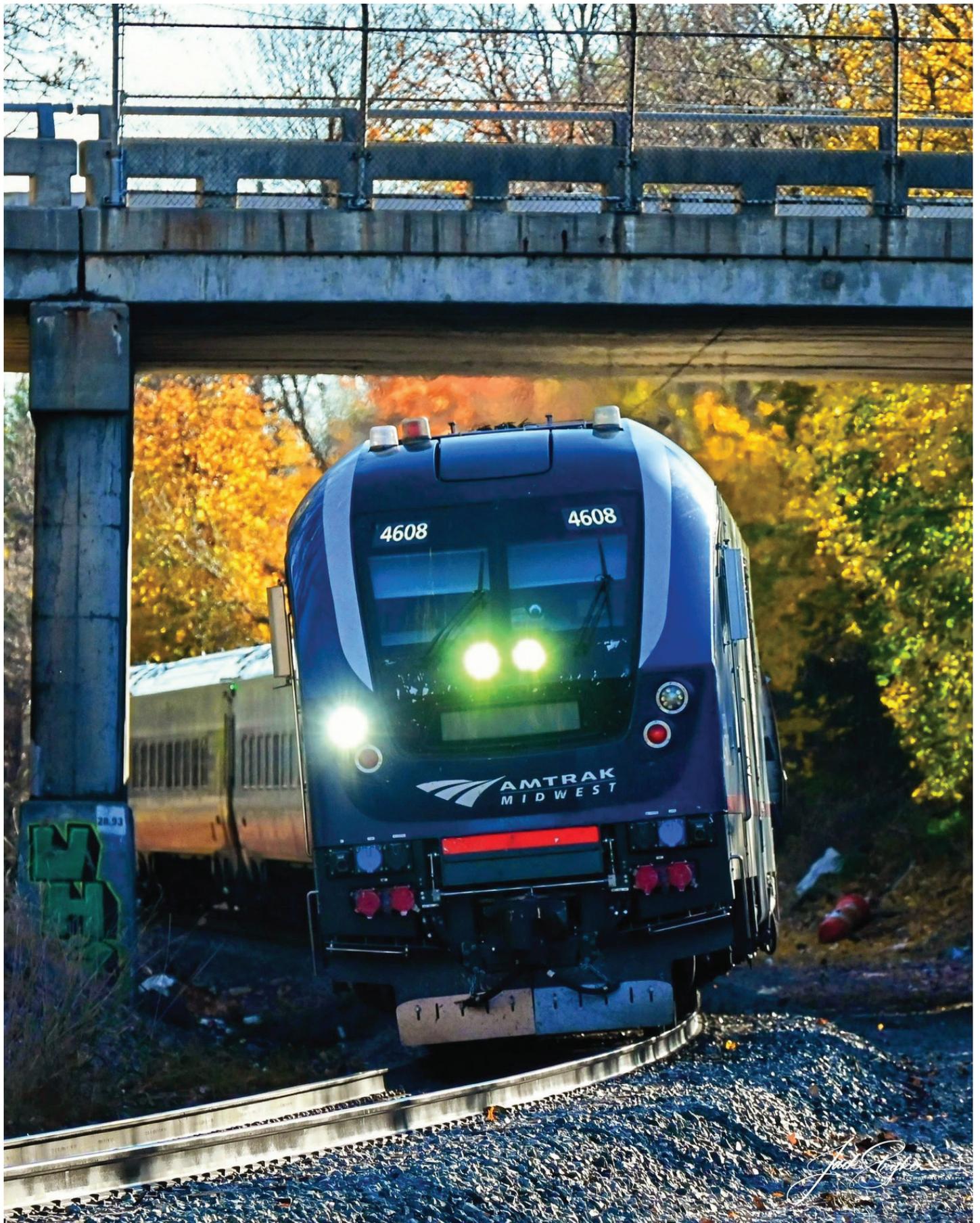
## Other Routes and Extensions

While these are the proposals that have been seriously considered, as MDOT expands our state's passenger rail network, the state should consider other rail connections that can bridge existing gaps, and provide increased service for many more Michiganders. These could include extending the *Blue Water* to Sarnia to link to Canada's VIA rail (much like the *Windsor Wolverine*), extending the *Wolverine* to Flint and Bay City, extending the Cleveland-Toledo-Detroit service to Port Huron, a Grand Rapids to Kalamazoo connection, or linking some destinations in the Upper Peninsula to Wisconsin's rail network.

119 USDOT (2025)



VIA Rail train leaving Windsor station with Detroit in the background. Once the *Wolverine* is extended to Windsor, travelers can transfer to this train to go to Toronto with ease (Deck 2018)



An Amtrak Midwest train passing underneath a bridge (Stryker 2025b).

# Recommendations

Michigan already has the foundation for a strong cross-state rail and bus system that connects all Michiganders to the breadth of amazing cities, towns, and recreation our state offers. The growth of ridership on Michigan's Amtrak services despite flat service has shown that there is a significant market for cross-state transit travel in the Great

Lakes State. Like every other form of transportation, however—from roads to airports—expanded cross-state rail and bus services will require public investment. In the coming years, the state should build on that foundation through strategic investments, including the following.



*Wolverine trains often have open seats in Metro Detroit, which could be advertised or subsidised. Photo: Stryker 2022.*

## Improve and Promote What We Have

- 1. Better publicize the existing system.** Currently, many residents are unaware of what intercity transportation options exist and how much money they could save using them. MDOT should develop a plan to encourage use of both train and bus service, create unified branding for cross state transportation options, advertise Amtrak and Indian Trails and other intercity bus services, and provide more rider-friendly information on all cross-state transportation services, whether public or private.
- 2. Make buying tickets easier for riders.** MDOT should work with Amtrak, Greyhound/Flix, and Indian Trails to provide a unified ticketing system for any route in Michigan, or at least allow tickets to be purchased across all platforms regardless of operator. Additionally, the state should pass a law allowing Amtrak to sell bus only *Amtrak Thruway* tickets. This will benefit riders at zero cost to the state.
- 3. Create an integrated plan for intercity rail and bus service.** Currently, there is limited coordination between MDOT's Office of Passenger Transportation (OPT), which oversees the state's intercity bus program, and the Office of Rail, which oversees passenger rail service. These offices should work together to develop an integrated plan for expanding, improving, and promoting cross-state rail and bus services.

The state should give both offices more support within MDOT, and consider if a dedicated Multimodal/Passenger Transportation Office within MDOT would be better for improving our cross-state transportation, as well as Michigan's other multimodal, non-car transportation offerings. Beyond just coordinating and implementing existing funding, this office should have a clear mission to improve and expand service to ensure all Michiganders can get where they need to go, regardless of whether they drive.



*Greyhound bus at night. While Indian Trails serves Up North, the bus only stops in most towns in the middle of the night. Bus travel should be convenient and frequent for all riders, and midday options should exist (Heisler 2019)*

## Improve Frequency and Convenience of Cross-state Transportation

- 4. Implement greater frequency in existing inter-city bus service.** While Michigan has a reasonable breadth of cross-state bus services, most run too infrequently and at such inconvenient times to be of serious use to most Michiganders. At a minimum, existing intercity bus service frequencies should be doubled with daytime routes, throughout the state.
- 5. Improve frequency and reliability on existing Amtrak routes.** Existing Amtrak routes are already well used, and there is clearly demand for additional service. The state should redouble its investments in faster and more reliable service on existing routes, as well as beginning the process of adding greater frequency.

## Provide More Connections Throughout Michigan

- 6. Invest in new intercity bus routes.** Given the glaring gap in connections between Michigan's biggest cities and Capitol, the state should act quickly to pilot bus services connecting Grand Rapids, Lansing, Brighton, and Detroit, as soon as possible. Express transit across the state running at least six times a day could immediately start to transform Michiganders' ability to get around and start building demand and experience for further improvements and expansions.  
  
The state should also study demand for additional rural bus services, including the possibility of seasonal express routes to Up North destinations and east-west connections across the northern
- 7. Accelerate planning for investment in additional routes.** The state should continue to study adding new passenger services, including Coast-to-Coast and North-South rail, in addition to a Detroit-Toledo connection, identifying every possible way to accelerate these studies and prepare for rapid implementation once the studies are complete. The state should have plans and funding ready to capitalize on federal matching dollars.

# Plan for Strategic Investments in Expanded Connections

- 8. Plan for continued investment and expansion.** MDOT should be constantly planning for the next step for Michigan's cross-state transit network. The next five years and next twenty years of rail and intercity bus services should be significant parts of every one of MDOT's long-range and 5-year plans, including what funding is needed to build, buy for, and operate these essential services.
- 9. Order new vehicles today for tomorrow's service expansion.** Currently, new rail cars and buses are on a major back order - with trains taking fully five years from order to delivery.<sup>120</sup> The state has done multiple studies showing

passenger rail and intercity buses provide essential service to Michiganders, are popular, and are good for the economy and the environment. In order to shorten the timeline for implementing additional services, MDOT and the State Legislature should order new buses and trains today for the planned expansions under Corridor ID, then decide in 3-4 years which routes to run the new equipment on.

Cross-state transit investment is critical for a more sustainable, equitable and prosperous Michigan. It is time for the state to recognize its value, and make cross-state bus and train service a fully funded component of Michigan's transportation program.

120 Anastor (2025)



Amtrak Wolverine over the Qline in Detroit (Stryker 2025d).

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