

Intercity Rail and Bus

Policy Brief



RTP 2026
**Regional
Transportation
Plan**



CEMPEL
INTERNATIONAL
TRANSPORTATION
CONSULTING

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Introduction

Intercity travel to and from northeastern Illinois can be done by car, airplane, train, or bus. Of these, rail and bus tend to be more affordable intercity travel options and provide a lifeline for many individuals, including students, workers, residents without cars, and vulnerable populations. At the same time, these modes support and boost the regional economy and the economies of those communities they connect, while providing a variety of social and environmental benefits relative to auto and aviation modes.¹ Intercity rail and bus can also provide a long distance “last-mile” type connection for individuals flying into Chicago but connecting to other smaller communities in the Midwest.

For an urban area like Northeastern Illinois, these modes also complement and connect with the regional transportation system.

Figure 1 shows current Amtrak stations, intercity bus stations or stops, South Shore Line stations (commuter service that connects Illinois and Indiana over about 100 miles), and rail infrastructure in and surrounding the seven-county Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) area. These are described in greater detail in the sections below.

Several key items elevate this topic for further exploration. There is growing recognition that robust, reliable intercity rail and bus systems are critical for northeastern Illinois economy and global competitiveness. While endowed with strong legacy systems for both modes, several growing and urgent issues threaten that competitiveness. The region risks losing its primary intercity bus terminal and having key services rerouted to other cities, Chicago Union Station is at capacity and antiquated in design, and rail bottlenecks undermine reliability throughout the system. In northeastern Illinois, Amtrak, in collaboration with local, regional, and state partners (including CMAP), has extensive plans for improving rail and station infrastructure. Finally, the last Federal government certification indicated a need for CMAP to focus on improving connectivity with intercity modes.

The sections below summarize:

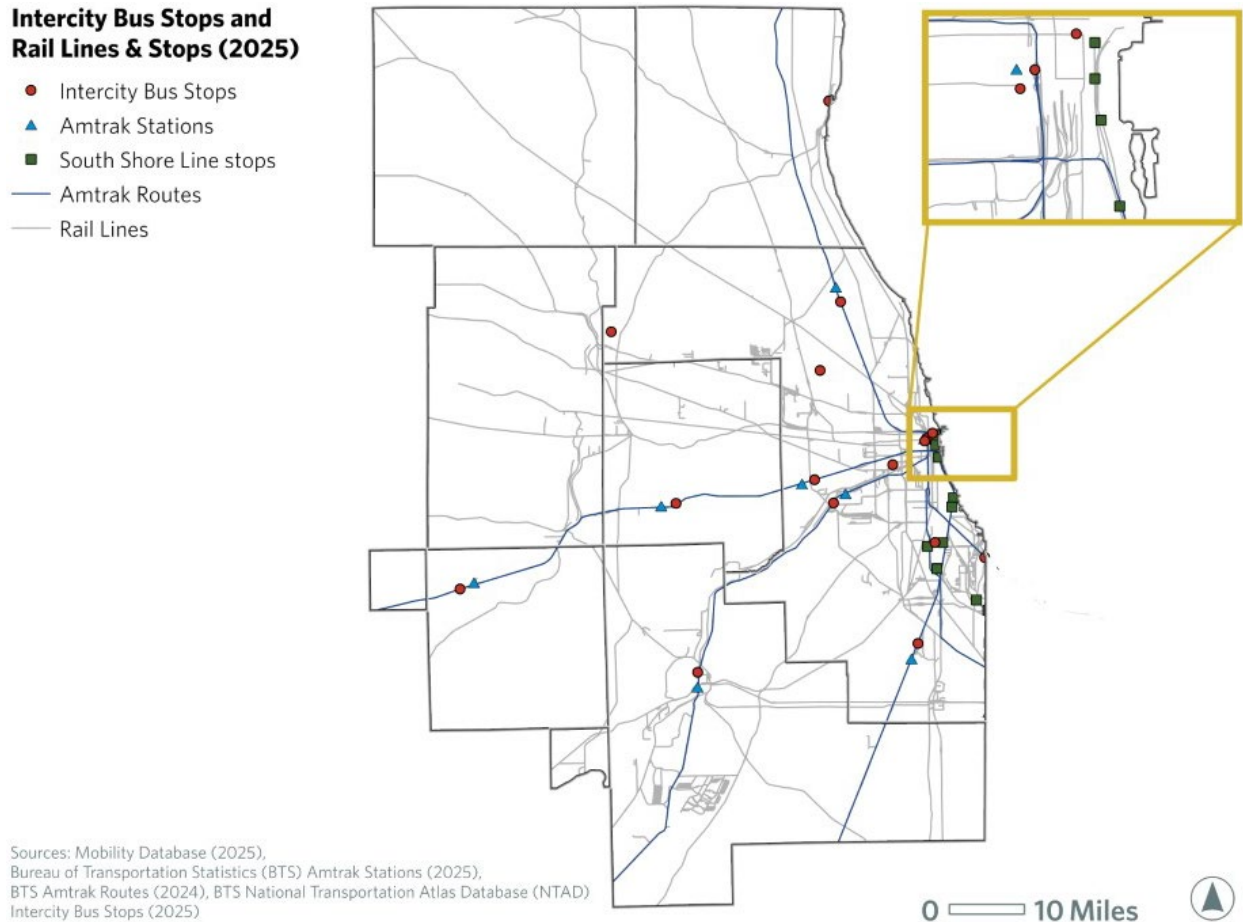
- State of the practice for intercity rail and bus in the region, including the existing system and services, governance, and funding;
- Emerging trends regionally and nationally and related key issues; and

¹ Intercity rail and bus modes strongly contribute to the goals of CMAP’s 2026 RTP, particularly: strengthen connections between people and places, prioritize safety and public health, mitigate pollution and invest in resilient infrastructure, and support economic prosperity and inclusive growth.

- Synthesis and recommendations for consideration.

Peer examples are provided throughout the Policy Brief and are summarized in the Appendix.

Figure 1: Existing Intercity Rail and Bus System



Intercity Rail State of Practice

Existing System

System Coverage

Amtrak, the primary intercity rail operator in the United States (US) and northeastern Illinois, serves the region with 16 different intercity rail lines serving eight different stations; an additional five stations on the periphery attract additional customers from the region (Table 1). Amtrak Thruway bus connections, ticketed through Amtrak, provide additional coverage. With these routes, customers in northeastern Illinois can reach 33 states and the District of Columbia in a single ride.

Table 1: Amtrak Routes and Annual Ridership by Station (FY2024)ⁱ

Station	Routes Serving Station	Ridership (Boardings+Alightings)
Chicago Union Station	Lincoln Service; Illini/Saluki; Carl Sandburg/Illinois Zephyr; Hiawatha; Borealis; Blue Water; Pere Marquette; Wolverine; Empire Builder; California Zephyr; Southwest Chief; City of New Orleans; Texas Eagle; Cardinal; Capitol Limited/Floridian; Lake Shore Limited	3,011,972
Glenview	Hiawatha; Borealis; Empire Builder	56,587
Homewood	Illini/Saluki; City of New Orleans	40,820
Joliet	Lincoln Service; Texas Eagle	70,113
La Grange	Carl Sandburg/Illinois Zephyr; California Zephyr; Southwest Chief	8,892
Naperville	Carl Sandburg/Illinois Zephyr; California Zephyr; Southwest Chief	30,704
Plano	Carl Sandburg/Illinois Zephyr; California Zephyr; Southwest Chief	5,289
Summit	Lincoln Service; Texas Eagle	19,749

Chicago Union Station (CUS) is the main station for Amtrak in the region, which it shares with six of Metra’s commuter rail lines. The station design has stub-end tracks both from the north and the south, forcing trains to turn around there and making it the terminal station for all Amtrak routes in the Midwest. This, therefore, naturally makes it a major transfer hub between lines or to other modes. As shown in Figure 1, the Amtrak routes enter the region and approach CUS along various tracks owned by different host railroads that also operate freight on those lines.

While Amtrak provides the only true intercity service, the South Shore Line is a rail line operated by the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD) between Millennium Station in downtown Chicago and the South Bend International Airport in South Bend, Indiana.ⁱⁱ The line serves six stations in the City of Chicago, which it shares with Metra’s Metra Electric line. While traditionally a commuter service, it also satisfies some intercity demand, as the South Shore Line connects two states and a covers a distance of about 100 miles.

NICTD recently completed double-tracking of its previous single-track route and moving their street-running tracks along 10th and 11th Streets in Michigan City. This has allowed the SSL to add 14 weekday trains for more frequent service, reduce delays, and shorten travel time.ⁱⁱⁱ NICTD also plans to soon open its new Monon Corridor (also known as the West Lake Corridor). It adds eight miles of service and includes four stations from Hammond to Dyer, as shown on Figure 1.^{iv,v}

Multimodal Connectivity

CUS has connections to Metra, Pace, and Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) bus, including the adjacent CTA bus terminal. That bus terminal has a direct underground connection to CUS and consolidates most adjacent CTA bus routes to one location; it also frees up valuable nearby curb space for other uses. CTA rail, while once directly connected decades ago, now requires a two-block walk outdoors to the Clinton CTA Blue Line station under I-290. Some intercity buses stop at CUS, while the main intercity bus terminal (Greyhound Terminal), is approximately four blocks away. CUS, being central in downtown Chicago, also has connectivity with Divvy bikeshare, various transportation network

companies (TNCs), and taxis. After the closure of the Amtrak-owned parking structure, access to rental cars is less direct.

The other Amtrak-served stations in the CMAP area are all served by Metra, and most are served by Pace as well.

System Usage

CUS is the busiest rail intermodal transportation hub in the Midwest and the busiest in the nation outside of the Northeast Corridor. Approximately 3 million Amtrak passengers boarded or alighted there in FY24; Amtrak’s second busiest in the region is Joliet, with over 70,000 passengers (Table 1 above).^{vi} The station is also Metra’s busiest. Amtrak service connects major transit hubs and key urban centers across the Midwest and the country. Amtrak provides more affordable travel options between some markets, attracting students traveling to universities. Nationally, there is limited variation in intercity rail usage across income or age.^{vii} Currently Amtrak’s highest ridership and highest frequency line out of Chicago is the Hiawatha to Milwaukee.

Current Roles and Responsibilities

Varying levels of government and public sector agencies interact with private companies to fund, build, and operate intercity passenger rail.

Most of Amtrak’s operating expenses are covered by revenues, but Congress provides operating grants every year to the railroad to cover additional costs. Starting with the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA) and carried forward in subsequent legislation, states are responsible for funding the operations of routes under 750 miles in length, and states also have the flexibility to choose a preferred operator for the service. The “state-supported services” that serve the CMAP area are shown in Table 2 (Numerous long-distance routes, which are entirely under Amtrak’s purview, also serve CUS and other Northeastern Illinois passenger stations). These shorter “state-supported services” are all operated by Amtrak, though the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) recently selected Metra as the future operator of Chicago – Rockford intercity rail service. This relationship necessarily makes Amtrak and IDOT close partners in the provision of intercity passenger rail service.

Table 2: State Supported Amtrak Services Serving Northeastern Illinois

Supported by IDOT	Supported by IDOT with Other State DOTs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lincoln Service (Chicago-Bloomington/Normal-Springfield-St. Louis) • Illini and Saluki Services (Chicago-Champaign-Carbondale) • Carl Sandburg and Illinois Zephyr Services (Chicago-Galesburg-Quincy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiawatha (Chicago-Milwaukee) • Borealis (Chicago - Milwaukee - St. Paul) • Blue Water (Chicago-Port Huron, Michigan) • Pere Marquette (Chicago-Grand Rapids, Michigan) • Wolverine (Chicago-Detroit/Pontiac)

Many of these routes cross multiple states, resulting in close coordination and agreements between these states on cost sharing and schedules. They coordinate through groups like the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC).

The shifting of these routes to state responsibility also has resulted in many states, including Illinois, investing in capital improvements, such as IDOT's substantial investment in the Chicago – Springfield – St. Louis corridor to improve speeds and reliability. Amtrak also invests its own revenues into improving its infrastructure: it has invested over \$60 million of its own funds at CUS since 2010.

Agencies can apply funds from numerous grant programs to transportation investments that include or impact passenger rail, or are specifically tailored to rail investment (such as Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) or Federal-State Partnership grants). Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing (RRIF) provides another mechanism for rail improvements. These types of funding programs require the specific investment to be included in Federally required state and regional plans, namely, the state rail plan and the CMAP Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). CUS Master Plan projects (described below) were included in GO TO 2040 and ON TO 2050 in the financially constrained list of regionally significant transit projects.

Rail investments in specific infrastructure, whether rail capacity or station improvements, necessarily require additional coordination with local authorities. Due to the need to connect them with other modes of transportation and comply with local zoning and code, among other concerns, passenger rail station investments are closely coordinated with – or entirely led by – local governments. For example, master planning at CUS – the only Amtrak-owned station in the CMAP area – was initially led by Chicago DOT. As planning progressed to design, Chicago DOT remained a key partner, along with Metra, the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), and IDOT. These partnerships include steering the project work, advising, and providing funding.

Coordination with private freight railroads is also a requirement, as these companies typically own the infrastructure on which Amtrak is operating. These “host railroads” generally control dispatching decisions on the tracks that they own. By law, Amtrak trains are supposed to receive preference over freight trains, but many host-dispatched trains arrive late at their destinations, and many routes do not meet on-time performance (OTP) standards established by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).^{viii}

Existing Plans: Near- and Mid-Term

The CUS Master Plan includes significant expansion and modernization of track, platform, and terminal capacity at CUS to accommodate existing needs and projected future growth. In addition to greatly increasing train and passenger capacity, it improves safety, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility, access into the station, and station air quality. Amtrak, as station owner, has advanced elements of the plan to design and construction.

Examples of specific proposed improvements include the following:

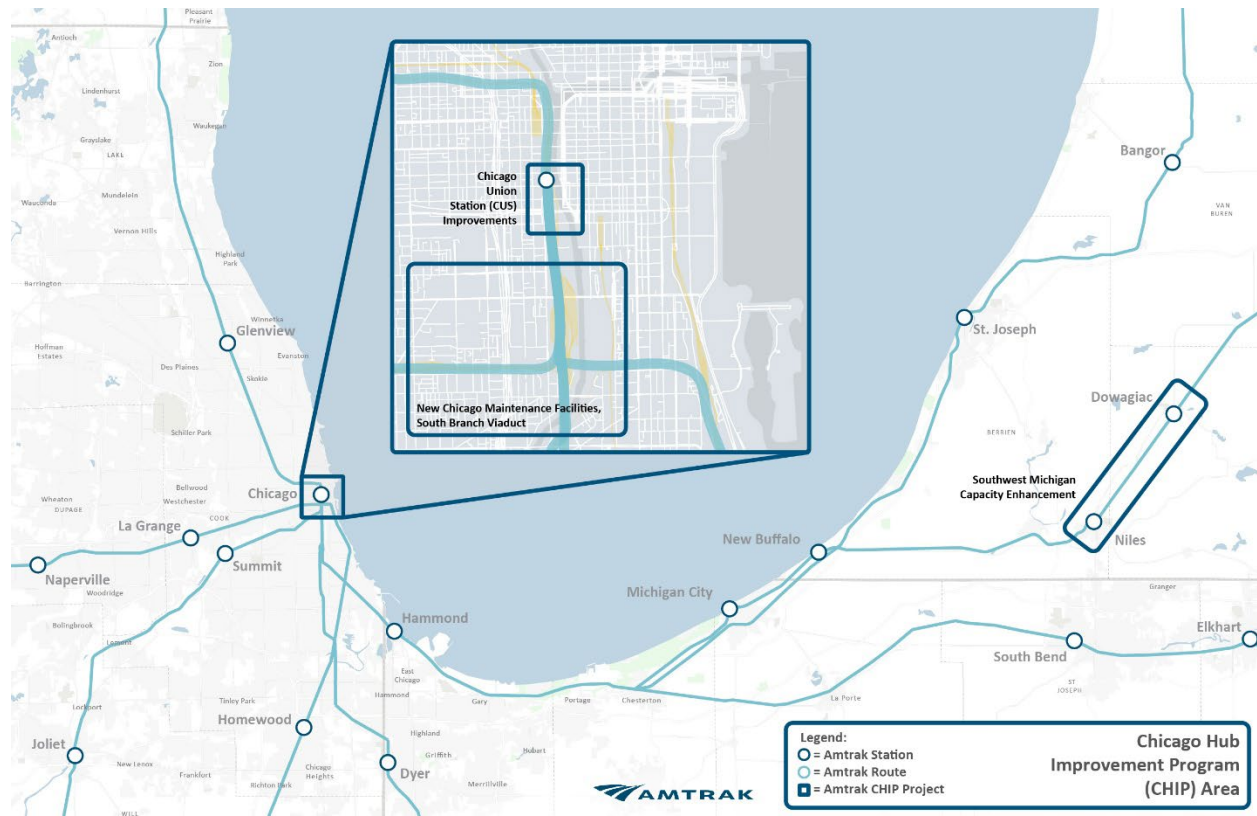
- The activation of the old Mail Platform, besides adding significant platform (berthing) and passenger holding capacity, also provides operational flexibility, such as the possibility of through-running service at CUS; this component of the Master Plan is about to enter construction.
- Other platform expansions and ventilation improvements to improve station air quality will soon begin final design and preliminary engineering and NEPA; internal concourse improvements are already in preliminary engineering and funded through final design.
- The construction of the BMO Tower south of CUS extended the underground walkway (formerly connecting to the Amtrak parking structure, and until the 1950s connecting to the L station previously on that site) to the northeast corner of Clinton and Van Buren, allowing for a future direct underground connection to the CTA Clinton Blue Line station.

Some of the proposed improvements at CUS have been packaged with track and other infrastructure work outside of CUS into the “Chicago Hub Improvement Program” (CHIP), led by Amtrak, in partnership with IDOT, Chicago DOT, Cook County, Metra, and the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), as shown in Figure 2.^{ix} The existing antiquated South Branch bridge requires frequent lifts and sometimes experiences mechanical issues, disrupting Amtrak, Metra commuter trains, as well as freight rail and barge traffic. The preferred design solution is awaiting grant funding to proceed to preliminary engineering/NEPA. Amtrak is also awaiting funding to proceed on new maintenance and storage facilities to replace the current over-capacity facility.^x

Although some components of CHIP will improve access to CUS in targeted ways, other issues remain. Access into Chicago and to CUS specifically is a major concern for passenger rail due to the bottlenecks and congestion in the Chicago rail network – the most congested in the nation. Services operate on lines run by freight railroads (host railroads) with heavy traffic, intersecting other lines with heavy traffic. Some routes follow circuitous paths (for example, several routes require time-consuming reverse movements to depart CUS over the St. Charles Air Line).

Several options are being explored by Amtrak to solve these challenges. One potential project, already part of the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program (CREATE) program (known as “P4” at Grand Crossing) would allow the six current Amtrak trains serving Champaign, Carbondale and points south to reroute from the Canadian National Lakefront and St. Charles Air Line route to the Norfolk Southern Chicago Line, thereby eliminating the reverse move. The re-route will reduce travel times by approximately 10 to 15 minutes each way. The project also will increase capacity on a congested section of the Norfolk Southern mainline that currently serves 14 daily Amtrak trains between Chicago and points east.^{xi}

Figure 2: Chicago Hub Improvement Program^{xii}

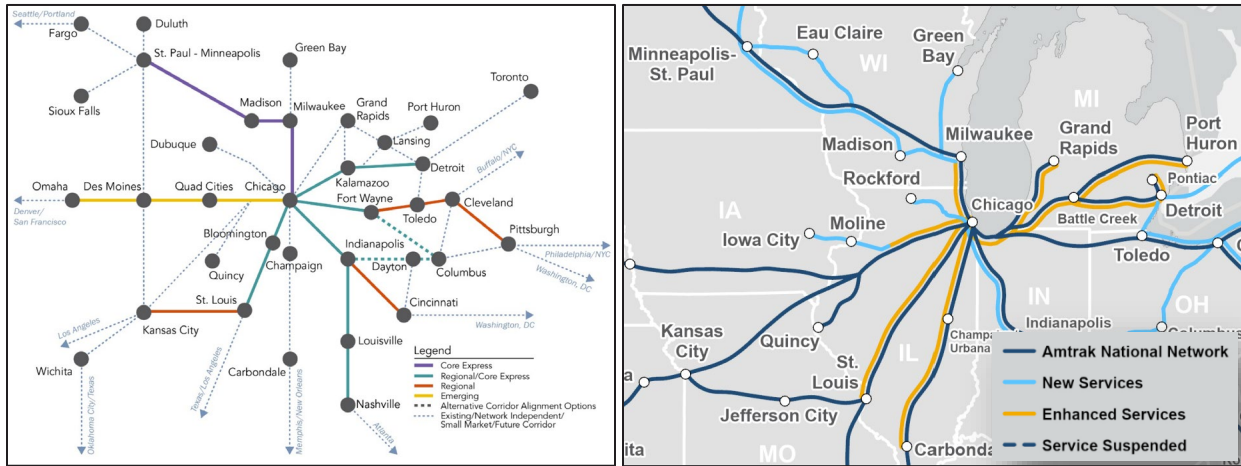


The Rock Island District provides a potential freight-free, higher capacity option for Amtrak services from the southwest (e.g., Lincoln Service) compared to their current routing over the Canadian National/Heritage Corridor tracks but requires a connection to Norfolk Southern tracks heading north into CUS. Both this option and the P4 option would be facilitated by the South Branch bridge replacement.

Existing Plans: Visionary

Improvements to CUS and access to CUS described above were evaluated against demand from two recent, robust visions for passenger rail expansion in northeastern Illinois. The FRA Midwest Regional Plan (2021) provides a bold vision for intercity passenger rail service, with increased coverage and frequency according to a tiered system (Figure 3).^{xiii} Amtrak similarly proposed increased coverage, frequency, and reliability in Amtrak Connects US (2021).^{xiv} Many specific corridors within these visionary plans have more specific studies underway, including state-funded work (such as the Chicago-Rockford corridor) and a dozen Corridor Identification and Development (Corridor ID) Program grant-funded studies affecting Chicago routes (such as the Hiawatha). Other studies, such as the Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee Passenger Rail Corridor Study, dovetail with Corridor ID efforts.^{xv}

Figure 3: FRA Midwest Regional Plan and Amtrak Connects US



Illinois' High-Speed Railway Commission Act created the High-Speed Railway Commission to create a plan for a high-speed rail line and feeder network connecting St. Louis, Missouri and Chicago. The plan will include current Amtrak and Metra services, connect the cities of Rockford, Moline, Peoria, and Decatur, and integrate inter-city bus service with the rail lines. The plan is currently under development.^{xvi}

Intercity Bus State of Practice

Existing System

System Coverage

Like intercity rail, northeastern Illinois has extensive intercity bus coverage (Figure 1). As intercity bus service is operated by independent, private carriers, not all stops are collocated. Table 3 summarizes key stops of each carrier and primary routes from Chicago.

In downtown Chicago, the most serviced stop with the highest demand is the Greyhound Terminal. However, some routes also stop at CUS and under I-290, with another proposed new route by another provider stopping at the Renaissance Hotel. Within Chicago outside of downtown, there are several well-used stops: multiple carriers stop at the new O'Hare Multimodal Facility and the 95th Street CTA Red Line station, where Greyhound has a ticket counter. Several suburbs are served by intercity bus, though some locations like Markham have recently lost their service.^{xvii}

Many of the bus carriers emphasize connections to universities, either stopping at college towns between major cities or stopping at universities within major cities. Additionally, UI Ride is operated by Facilities & Services at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in collaboration with Facilities Management at the University of Illinois Chicago to connect those two campuses. This service is exclusively available to University of Illinois students, faculty, and staff.^{xviii}

Table 3: Intercity Bus Services

Carrier	Stops in Region	Major Destinations from Northeast Illinois
Greyhound	Naperville, Elgin, downtown (Greyhound terminal), 95th red line	Indianapolis - Cincinnati Cleveland Detroit Memphis St. Louis St. Paul
Flixbus	Naperville, Elgin, downtown (Greyhound terminal), 95th red line	Detroit St. Paul Indianapolis - Cincinnati (proposed) Madison (proposed) State College, PA - New York (proposed)
CoachUSA/Van Galder	CUS O'Hare Multimodal Facility	Downtown Chicago - Madison via O'Hare and Rockford; O'Hare – Milwaukee/Waukesha via Kenosha/Racine
Barons	Greyhound Bus Terminal	Indianapolis - Cincinnati Cleveland Detroit Memphis St. Louis St. Paul
Peoria Charter	Desplaines under I-290 O'Hare Multimodal Facility Midway Northbrook Skokie (Old Orchard) Matteson Downers Grove Oak Brook Schaumburg (Woodfield)	Peoria Bloomington-Normal Champaign-Urbana West Lafayette
Burlington Trailways	Greyhound Bus Terminal	
GOGO Charters	Renaissance Chicago Downtown Waukegan Metra Station	West Lafayette – Indianapolis (proposed) South Bend – Detroit (proposed) Milwaukee – Madison (proposed)
Amtrak Thruway	CUS	Connections operated by other carriers, including cities such as: Peoria Nashville Louisville Indianapolis Madison
Tornado Bus	Little Village (Chicago)	Memphis, Texas
UI Ride	University of Illinois at Chicago	Champaign-Urbana

Note: Information current as of May 2025

Multimodal Connectivity

In downtown Chicago, the Greyhound Bus Terminal is approximately four blocks from CUS and one block from a CTA Blue Line station. The central location ensures that passengers also have connectivity with CTA and Pace, Divvy bikeshare, TNCs, and taxis. Amtrak Thruway intercity bus connection services stop at CUS.

The 95th Street CTA Red Line intercity bus stop is well connected to CTA rail, CTA bus, and Pace bus to the south suburbs. Most other regional stops are more limited with some Pace service available in some locations.

While not strictly intercity bus, regional commuter bus parallels intercity bus in the types of infrastructure and funding it can benefit from; examples in other cities show that regions with robust commuter bus networks often also have robust intercity bus networks and infrastructure. In northeastern Illinois, the ChicaGo Dash is an express commuter bus service from Downtown Valparaiso to Downtown Chicago utilizing 53-passenger coach buses with lavatories, Wi-Fi, free parking, and bike racks. The buses stop curbside at several locations within the Loop. The service is funded by Valparaiso

Redevelopment Commission, the Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority, FTA, and the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC).^{xix}

Pace operates a variety of regional express routes, including five bus routes that use the I-55 shoulder, two routes that use the I-94 shoulder, and six routes that use the I-90 Flex Lane. Bus ridership on the I-55 corridor has increased more than 700 percent since the service was introduced, and on-time performance - which averaged less than 70 percent - is now over 90 percent. Service expansions are planned for some of these express routes.^{xx}

System Usage

Across the U.S., intercity buses carried about 50 million passengers in 2023, with the largest carrier being FlixBus, a European train and bus operator that acquired Greyhound in 2021.^{xxi} Flix North America, parent company of both FlixBus and Greyhound, recently reported a 7.5 percent year-over-year increase in ridership over the peak winter holiday season.^{xxii} FlixBus has grown its bus miles by over 10 percent over the past two years. A Chaddick Institute report projected U.S. bus ridership growth of 4 percent in 2025, outpacing forecasts for airline and car travel. Chicago's Greyhound Terminal serves FlixBus, Greyhound, Barons Bus, and Burlington Trailways, has around 76 daily movements (arrivals and departures combined), and serves about 500,000 passengers annually.^{xxiii}

Like intercity rail, intercity bus carriers are focusing on providing affordable options that connect students to universities, major transit hubs, and key urban centers. They have also traditionally connected smaller cities that may not have rail or air connections, acting as lifelines for those communities. Advocates further cite that intercity buses heavily serve "low-income travelers, students, seniors, victims of domestic violence, the disabled community, people seeking medical care (including reproductive healthcare and gender-affirming healthcare), LGBTQ+ people, and beyond." Two-thirds of intercity bus passengers

Peer Snapshot: Seattle, WA

→ Sound Transit Express regional buses utilize spacious coaches to provide a service contracted out to Community Transit, King County Metro and Pierce Transit, who operate and maintain the coaches. The buses carry more than 54,000 people daily. The services use managed lanes, and Sound Transit funds transit centers and HOV access lanes along ramps from transit centers to improve bus flow.

make less than \$40,000 a year, a third make less than \$20,000, and a quarter have no other transportation option.^{xxiv}

Current Roles and Responsibilities

There is currently no comprehensive organizational, governance, coordination, planning, or marketing structure around intercity bus transportation in Illinois or the CMAP area. Intercity bus services and stations in the region are driven by the private sector carriers themselves.

The Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) formula grants for rural areas program (5311) provide states with capital, planning, and operating assistance to support public transportation in rural areas with populations of less than 50,000.^{xxv} Intercity bus service connecting these communities is also eligible for 5311 funding. IDOT applies for and receives the funds and administers the program, with intercity carriers as subrecipients. Current supported routes in Illinois serve the Quad Cities, Bloomington, Danville, and Rockford. Other opportunities for Federal support include the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) program and Community Transit Grant program. These subsidized routes start out as unprofitable, but sometimes ridership increases and per-trip subsidies decrease, freeing up those public funds to expand similar bus services on other needed routes.^{xxvi}

In total across the country, very little public money is currently spent on intercity bus transportation. Under the 2021 infrastructure bill, funds authorized for intercity bus capital and rural operating expenses were only one-third of one percent of the funds authorized for passenger rail and public transit; this is an even smaller percentage when including COVID relief funds.^{xxvii}

Existing Plans

IDOT is currently procuring consultants to develop a statewide bus plan. Proposed route expansions from private carriers are shown above in Table 1: carriers appear to be bullish about expansion of service out of Chicago. However, the potential loss of the Greyhound Terminal (discussed below) caused Greyhound to briefly consider moving their northeastern Illinois service hub to Gary, Indiana.^{xxviii}

Emerging Trends and Key Issues

General

Intercity passenger rail and bus services in the U.S. had historically been the purview of the private sector, including both infrastructure and operations. After the creation of Amtrak in 1971, intercity passenger rail shifted to the public sector, but under the purview of a government corporation and still with limited government funding relative to other modes and with a long-term philosophy of self-sufficiency.

Intercity buses, however, still receive limited attention from the public and are mostly assumed to be a private-sector concern; they are not a standard part of most regional or state transportation plans, outside of a cursory mention. This mode may not capture attention until vital lifelines they provide are about to be severed.

The perceived role of government in these modes is changing. Just as the public sector has been almost entirely responsible for intercity auto travel, and has heavily supported aviation through airport development, airline subsidies, and ensuring intermodal connectivity at airports, states and regions have begun playing a role in intercity rail and bus to varying degrees, particularly with increased funding for passenger rail infrastructure and operations.

Broadly across both intercity bus and rail, several trends have been emerging:

- Regions and states are moving away from viewing intercity bus or rail as "special services" and emphasizing their importance within the broader multimodal transportation system;
- Ridership trends are increasing across all intercity modes, with ridership reaching or exceeding pre-COVID numbers; and
- Regions and cities are investing in intermodal hubs for intercity bus and rail that connect to regional transportation modes.

Intercity Rail

Several emerging trends and key issues are affecting intercity rail in northeastern Illinois in addition to the general items above:

- Increased Federal funding through the IIJA has created more opportunities to expand rail infrastructure, but the future of this funding is less certain.
- Planning for increased service coverage and frequencies has increased with recent bold plans by FRA and Amtrak, Illinois and neighboring states, and now an ongoing high-speed rail feasibility study in Illinois; these all will require increased rail and station capacity to accommodate them and capture their benefits in northeastern Illinois.
- Alternative intercity passenger rail operators have emerged in recent years: in Florida, Brightline is a private company operating passenger rail on its own right of way, and it is currently constructing an entirely new high-speed line between Los Angeles and Las Vegas; locally, Metra has been selected by IDOT to operate service to Rockford, with plans to begin service in the next few years.
- About 45 percent of aircraft movements at O'Hare are on regional jets, contributing to the airport having a low number of seats per flight relative to most U.S. hubs, despite having the highest number of aircraft arriving and departing in the nation. The average

flight distance of these routes for United and American airlines is about 470 miles, with popular destinations including Milwaukee, Indianapolis, South Bend, St. Louis, and Madison.^{xxix}

In Europe numerous airlines and rail companies have partnered to provide connecting services under a single ticket under a codeshare agreement. The intent is to provide more options and flexibility for passengers and more efficient utilization of limited runway and gate space at airports by shifting short-haul flights to rail.

Intercity Bus

Several emerging trends and key issues are affecting intercity bus in northeastern Illinois:

- Intercity bus is experiencing substantial growth in demand, and carriers are responding with increased service:
 - Intercity bus ridership is anticipated to grow 4 percent in 2025, a rate substantially above the 2.4–2.8 percent growth of domestic auto and air travel projected by the U.S. Travel Association.^{xxx}
 - The Motorcoach Builders Survey for the third quarter of 2024 saw sales of new coaches up over 15 percent from the same period in the previous year, after earlier post-pandemic travel market challenges and supply chain issues had postponed purchases.^{xxxi}
- Specific markets and types of services have different dynamics:
 - FlixBus growth is focused on major markets rather than thinly traveled routes.^{xxxii}
 - State-supported intercity bus networks are expected to expand; they generally are less vulnerable to any “fiscal cliff” than public transit systems.^{xxxiii}
 - FlixBus and other carriers are focusing on getting students to universities as an important part of their market.
 - Bus routes to major airports are also increasing.^{xxxiv}
- Despite growth in intercity bus service and demand, cities are facing the closure of their main bus terminals:

- When FlixBus acquired Greyhound, station assets were not part of the deal.^{xxxv}
- Traditional downtown Greyhound stations have been lost in Houston, Philadelphia, Portland, Richmond, and several Ohio cities; Nashville’s site has been listed for redevelopment.^{xxxvi}

Peer Snapshot: Richmond, VA

→ After the closure of the Richmond, VA, Greyhound station by the owner, the City of Richmond allowed Greyhound to shift operations to the city-owned Main Street Station; this included use of a portion of the building.

- Chicago’s Greyhound Terminal is on the list of “endangered” stations, as it nearly closed when the least was up until FlixBus secured a month-to-month lease with the owner (a private investment firm who acquired the station when Greyhound was sold to FlixBus’ parent company).^{xxxvii} Chicago would be the largest city in the Northern Hemisphere without an intercity bus terminal, and the coldest city in the world without one.^{xxxviii}
- The loss of the station will adversely impact the more than 500,000 passengers that currently use the facility; this market is very diverse and ranges from workers to students to the underserved to vulnerable populations.

- Without public sector-facilitated coordination, and with limited space, some intercity buses or shuttles use valuable curb space not designated for this use.^{xxxix}
- Some regions are improving connections to regional transportation modes through better planning and coordination, including public sector-led or public-private partnerships-led development of intermodal bus terminals.
- Some larger urban regions are developing regional commuter bus networks using coach buses, which have synergies with intercity bus in terms of necessary infrastructure.

- Having buses stop at a “flagship destination”, connected to a robust local transit network that allows passengers to move around without a car once they arrive, is a key element of successful intercity bus service.^{xI}
- Similar to intercity rail, intercity bus has the potential to free up airport space and provide operational flexibility by replacing short-haul flights. In North America, United, American, Air Canada, and Sun Country airlines have already been experimenting with replacing short connections with buses (that are ticketed as a "connecting flight"); American recently announced expansion of this approach, including South Bend-Chicago and Rockford-Chicago. Passengers will clear security at their local airport and arrive airside at O’Hare.^{xii}

Peer Snapshot: Atlanta, GA

→ Atlanta recently opened a new privately-owned 14,000 sf, two-story Greyhound Terminal including ticketing, operations, administrative office, lobby and restaurant. It has eight intercity slips for Greyhound, Southeastern Stages, and Megabus; two MARTA bus stops; and a direct connection to MARTA rail. GDOT administered the project on behalf of Greyhound, using FTA 5311 funds that it accumulated over several years.

Synthesis and Recommendations

The CMAP region has a strong foundation in intercity rail and bus transportation. However, emerging trends related to these modes provide both opportunities and risks for northeastern Illinois: these risks threaten to undermine the region’s global competitiveness.

Meeting these challenges requires CMAP and its partners to strengthen their role and commitment to intercity rail and bus in several ways:

- Improving coordination and collaboration among relevant stakeholders, including providing a voice for intercity bus in the region;
- Strengthening the integration of these modes in regional planning and programming;
- Acquiring and directing funding to these modes and collaborating with the private sector; and
- Supporting specific infrastructure projects, including CUS modernization and expansion and elimination of rail bottlenecks (through CHIP), and preservation and modernization of the region’s primary bus terminal.

Specific recommendations in these areas are listed below. These recommendations reflect practices from peer regions, lessons from implementation experience, and emerging national discussions.

Coordination and Collaboration

- **Form Intercity Bus Working Groups or Committees:** States and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) can serve as coordinators and facilitators with critical entities in the preservation and development of intercity bus transportation. In other regions or states, and previously in Illinois, this includes standing working groups or committees tasked with this topic. These can include agencies (e.g., state, regional, county, local, and transit), private sector carriers, and beneficiaries (e.g., universities, airports, and advocacy groups for populations dependent on intercity bus services). The state and MPO might designate a point-person for the topic to ensure ownership. At a minimum, intercity carriers and beneficiaries can be included as stakeholders in existing transportation planning efforts.

Peer Snapshot: Ohio

→ The Rural Intercity Bus Advisory Committee (RIBAC) was established to advise Ohio DOT in the administration and implementation of the Statewide Rural Intercity Bus Program. The committee, consisting of seven members, typically meets approximately once every quarter.

- **Promote Intercity Bus:** Successful states and regions promote and build awareness around the mode. This may include incorporating discussion of the mode in transportation meetings and committees to better inform local communities and other stakeholders, as well as developing marketing and promotional materials for the general public, particularly for services that are publicly supported.

Planning and Programming

- **Include in RTP and Transportation Improvement Program (TIP):** A key way in which any MPO can support a mode of transportation is by including its infrastructure needs in the RTP and, ultimately, programming specific projects in the TIP. CMAP has regularly included passenger rail improvements, such as the CUS Master Plan, within its RTP, but not intercity bus improvements.

Peer Snapshot: Atlanta

→ The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) includes a section on intercity bus providers, routes, infrastructure, and funding in its RTP.

- **Coordinate with and Support Other Planning Efforts:**

Many states have developed statewide bus plans, as well as systematic approaches for expanding the system with new routes using grant funding. IDOT is about to engage on a statewide bus plan. CMAP can coordinate and support these efforts to ensure the region's needs are reflected in the plan and consistency with local and regional efforts. IDOT's planning effort can serve as a starting point for intercity bus planning, with CMAP and local governments and agencies potentially playing a role in supporting plan implementation.

Peer Snapshot: Massachusetts

→ The Regional Bus Network Assessment report, developed by Massachusetts DOT's (MassDOT's) Rail and Transit Division and Office of Transportation Planning in September 2024, provides standards to develop intercity bus service and an intercity bus plan for the state.

- **Conduct Regional System-Level Bus Network Planning:**

Some regions engage in planning efforts to improve regional bus infrastructure to accommodate regional buses; they then incorporate intercity bus demand and infrastructure needs into that process. Planning efforts can include the development of regional bus networks. Many regions have captured synergies between robust regional bus networks and intercity bus. Besides terminals or stations, infrastructure might include bus lanes, bus on shoulder, and other forms of managed lanes. Such efforts also provide an opportunity to quantify the benefits of both regional and intercity bus transportation. The region could build on efforts by Pace and providers like ChicaGO Dash.

Peer Snapshot: Seattle

→ Sound Transit Express regional buses utilized spacious coaches to provide a service contracted out to Community Transit, King County Metro and Pierce Transit, who operate and maintain the coaches. There are synergies between this system and Washington State DOT's Travel Washington intercity bus service.

- **Engage in Intercity Bus Terminal Planning:**

In many regions, bus terminal development is driven by the public sector. Collaborative planning efforts here can help determine and ensure optimal location, integration with other modes, and funding approaches.

Peer Snapshot: Virginia

→ Virginia's Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) connects the state-led intercity bus routes with local public transit, airports, and with Amtrak and other intercity bus providers.

- **Improve Curb Management and Enforcement:**

Some cities, such as Seattle, New York, and Boston, have more robust and strict curb management approaches. In parallel to developing an appropriate "home" for intercity buses, municipalities can

strengthen efforts to discourage unplanned and unsanctioned curbside stops by those buses.

- **Update CREATE:** The successful CREATE program is a national best practice. As Amtrak continues to study options for improved passenger rail, updating the program to accommodate those projects is another mechanism to help build awareness and direct funding.
- **Work With the Department of Aviation and Airlines to Strengthen Integration with Air Service and Reduce Impacts of Short-Haul Flights.** Better connecting intercity rail and bus to O'Hare and Midway has the potential for large benefits for travelers, for society, and for airlines. Airlines – including in Chicago – have already begun to implement their own intercity bus service to replace short-haul flights. This has direct, positive financial impacts for airlines, but also reduces costs of further expansion at our region's airports – costs that get passed on to airlines and their customers. Airlines in Europe have long coordinated with passenger rail providers to provide codeshare connections from major aviation hubs.

Facilitation of Funding

- **Direct or Redirect Current Funding Streams:** MPOs direct various streams of money from the Federal and state level to agencies and projects through their planning and programming processes. CMAP should consider bus and rail infrastructure and facilities as part of this.
- **Apply for Federal Grants:** States and MPOs commonly support the development of bus and rail infrastructure through the facilitation of grant applications. This includes helping a state or region prioritize projects for which grants will be submitted, and then helping the development of the grants themselves. CMAP and IDOT currently work with partners, including Amtrak, on the submittal of grants for major Federal grant programs. This includes working with agencies to identify the key projects that will be submitted, providing letters of support, and other forms of support.
- **Secure Public Funding for Facilities and Infrastructure:** Public funding for intercity bus terminals is common among bus terminals domestically and globally. US examples include leveraging Federal 5311 formula funds, state funds, city funds, transit agency funds, and sometimes funds from specially created bodies (Transbay Joint Powers Authority or Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, for example). The types of entities involved in providing funding varies depending on how many modes are incorporated into the facility.

Peer Snapshot: Atlanta

→ Atlanta's new intermodal Greyhound Terminal was administered by Georgia DOT (GDOT), using FTA 5311 funds that it accumulated over several years.

- **Secure Public Funding for Operations:** At least 12 states have created robust intercity bus networks that they fund, leveraging Federal 5311 funds and matches. They generally contract with existing private carriers to operate the service, with the state and Federal money making up the gap in ticket revenues. Some regional transportation bodies are also engaged in similar approaches for regional express buses.

Peer Snapshot: Washington

- Washington State’s public-private partnership includes Federal 5311 funds and in-kind match by the operators by way of applying the value of unsubsidized connecting intercity bus service.
- Virginia, Massachusetts, Maine, Ohio, and Colorado also successfully leverage 5311 funds and work with private operators to ensure robust intercity bus services.

- **Leverage Public-Private Partnerships:** There are many successful examples of public-private partnerships in the development of passenger intermodal terminals. These usually involve the development of a valuable site for residential, office, hotel, and retail, with the developer providing payment to an agency to include bus or rail facilities or with the developer being directly responsible for construction of those facilities as part of their development. These are well integrated, synergistic developments and partnerships. The public sector brings public funding of the types mentioned above and ensures the public interest is represented.

- **Utilize Value Capture and Other Funding Streams:** An intermodal terminal site that includes broader development can be a good candidate for value capture as a funding mechanism. Other revenues, besides those from retail and other tenants, can include bus entrance fees from carriers.

Peer Snapshot: Boston

- Boston’s South Station expansion and associated overbuild development is jointly run by the Boston Planning and Development Agency, Hines, and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA).
- The expansion is better connecting bus, rail, and other modes, and includes 50 percent more bus capacity. Mixed use development, retail revenue, and bus gate fees help to fund the project and ongoing operations.

- **Accelerate Project Delivery:** Whether the developer of particular infrastructure (bus terminal, rail terminal, additional trackage) is public or private, public entities like a state or local agency can help coordinate to reduce costs associated with getting easements, permits, environmental review, and other components of project development.

Specific Infrastructure Investments

Intercity Bus

- **Secure and Improve the Region’s Central Intercity Bus Terminal:** All large cities globally have intercity bus terminals: mostly these are publicly funded, at least in part. The best examples are centrally located and integrated with intercity rail and local and regional transit, among other modes. They provide shelter and amenities for passengers. In other cities, once a publicly funded terminal is built, carriers are required to use it rather than stop curbside. The FlixBus CEO recently wrote that “[t]he most impactful use of targeted federal investments would be infrastructure improvements such as the construction or renovation of intermodal transportation hubs. Many local transportation centers that exist currently may need small upgrades to accommodate intercity buses.”^{xlii}

Peer Snapshot: Various

- San Francisco’s Transbay Transit Center and New York City’s Port Authority Bus Terminal are large, publicly-owned, intermodal bus terminals.
- Los Angeles County and the City of Richmond, Virginia, provide space for intercity bus operations at their main passenger rail terminals.

- **Other Bus Stops or Stations:** Intercity buses stop at many other locations around the region. There may be opportunities to work with carriers and create better facilities in those locations as well, connected to intercity or commuter rail and bus lines. The O’Hare Multimodal Facility provides one example.

- **Improve Direct Connectivity to Expressways:** Successful bus terminals and stops for intercity (or regional) buses are in close proximity to – and sometimes directly connected to – expressways to avoid the need for excessive running of intercity buses on local streets, slowing down bus operations and adding to general street congestion. Pace currently has bus stations directly along the Jane Addams Tollway, for example.

Peer Snapshot: Various

- The Transbay Transit Center and the Port Authority Bus Terminal are directly linked to highways, bridges, and tunnels.
- Sound Transit has invested in high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes on ramps that connect to their transit centers and park-and-ride lots to facilitate bus movement.

- **Add Bus Lanes on Local Roads and Expressways:** Currently northeastern Illinois has flex lanes on some expressways that allow shoulder running for buses; there are also limited bus-only lanes on local roads. Inclusion of all buses – including intercity buses – on these facilities is beneficial for that mode and its passengers. These types of lanes, and other types of managed lanes (HOV and high-occupancy/toll (HOT), for example), are more prominent in many other regions, and can continue to be expanded in the region.

Peer Snapshot: Seattle & Denver

- Sound Transit Express regional buses use managed lanes, and Sound Transit funds transit centers and HOV access lanes along ramps from transit centers to improve bus flow.
- Colorado’s publicly-funded intercity bus service uses HOV lanes in the Denver area.

Intercity Rail

- **Upgrade Rail Access to CUS:** Amtrak, working with its partners, has studied options to improve passenger rail access to CUS from outside the region, getting trains to CUS more quickly and reliably. Options vary depending on the route, but include potential improvements at Grand Crossing, to the Rock Island District, and the South Branch bridge. This is part of the CHIP program, and elements of this already have secured limited funding. CMAP and its partners can continue supporting these projects.
- **Construct CUS Improvements:** Amtrak, working with its partners, has studied options to improve passenger and train capacity at CUS to accommodate current and future demand, as laid out in the FRA Midwest Regional Plan and Amtrak Connects US. This is part of the CHIP program, and elements of this already have secured limited funding. CMAP and its partners can continue supporting these projects.

Conclusion

By continuing to include intercity rail-related investments in regional planning efforts, and by expanding to include intercity bus, CMAP can strengthen these modes in northeastern Illinois. CMAP can act as a partner and collaborator with IDOT to help them improve intercity bus coordination and planning across the state, and can ensure stakeholders and operators for both modes are at the table for planning and programming discussions. Building a collective understanding of the value of these modes among regional and local partners is a key first step; in addition to broad impacts to regional economic competitiveness, these modes are particularly critical for students, workers, residents without cars, and vulnerable populations. Ultimately, these modes provide cost-effective means of addressing some of the region’s goals as set out in the 2026 RTP:

- **Strengthen connections between people and places.** Good intercity rail and bus connections provide more options, more access, and more mobility for northeastern Illinois residents.

- **Prioritize safety and public health.** Passenger trains and bus are much safer modes of transportation than personal passenger vehicles: Fatality rates per 100 million passenger miles are 0.52 for personal passenger vehicles, 0.02 by train (most of which are individuals at grade crossings or trespassing on railroad property), and 0.007 by bus.^{xliii} Shifting more trips to these modes from automobiles saves lives.
- **Mitigate pollution and invest in resilient infrastructure.** Intercity rail and bus emit much less pollution per passenger mile than personal vehicles or airplanes. Traveling by Amtrak is 46 percent more energy efficient than driving and 34 percent more efficient than flying, all while consuming a much smaller footprint and promoting more environmentally friendly and inclusive development.^{xliv} These services also provide additional redundancy in the transportation system; rail in particular can move large numbers of people even when weather events may halt highway and air transportation out of the region.
- **Support economic prosperity and inclusive growth.** Trains and buses connect economic centers and provide more productive time in route compared to driving.

Appendix A: Peer Examples

Publicly Funded and Planned Intercity Bus Systems

Colorado

In 2015, the Colorado DOT launched Bustang, its own intercity bus service, funded with state money and operated by an independent company, Ace Express Coaches. Bustang connects cities to rural communities across the state, with buses departing Denver Union Station's underground bus terminal to places like Vail, Grand Junction, and Durango; where available, the services utilize HOV lanes. The state funded a \$30 million expansion of bus service over recent years, and the program is nimble enough to drop services that do not perform well. In its first full month of operations, the service carried just over 7,000 riders; In FY2024, Bustang services averaged more than 24,000 riders a month.^{xlvi}

Maine

Maine launched a state-supported weekday and weekend bus service in July connecting Portland and the cities of Lewiston and Auburn. From 2018 to 2023, three separate state-supported studies looked at the potential for passenger rail service between the two points. Capital costs were estimated in the range of \$264 million to \$349 million, with annual operations and maintenance costs estimated at \$15 million to \$20 million. The bus option was estimated at \$1.6 million for capital costs with annual costs from \$850,000 to \$1.2 million. The two-year pilot program is designed to test the demand for public transportation between the two regions. While the service uses state funds, after the two-year pilot Federal funds could be used. The state uses 5311 funds for other intercity bus routes.^{xlvi}

Massachusetts

MassDOT administers the Rural Intercity Bus Connections program using Federal funds, with the goal of enhancing accessibility and connectivity for residents in rural communities who depend on intercity bus services for essential travel to larger urban hubs. Since 2016 they have granted over \$8 million to agencies and carriers.^{xlvii}

To receive funding through the most recent grant process, applicants had the option to select a route from the Regional Bus Network Assessment, apply to address a previously funded route, or propose an entirely new route. The Regional Bus Network Assessment report, developed by MassDOT's Rail and Transit Division and Office of Transportation Planning in September 2024, provides standards to develop intercity bus service. Those standards require:

- That a route allows a passenger to reach Boston or New York City with no more than one transfer,
- That riders are able to take a day trip and spend at least five hours at their destination, and

- Daily service with at least one round trip a day, or more for higher-demand destinations.^{xlviii}

Using the four metrics of high population density, transit-dependent population, major trip generators (places to eat, run errands, go to school or work, shop, socialize, or engage in recreation), and proximity to major job centers, the report flagged neighborhoods across Massachusetts with unmet transit needs.^{xlix}

Ohio

The Rural Intercity Bus Advisory Committee (RIBAC) is a committee established to advise Ohio DOT in the administration and implementation of the Statewide Rural Intercity Bus Program. The RIBAC is charged with providing a statewide perspective to adequately represent the intercity needs of all of Ohio. The committee, consisting of seven members, typically meets approximately once every quarter.^l

Through this, the state leverages Federal funds to connect rural communities to urban centers with GoBus. GoBus is administered by Hocking Athens Perry Community Action's Transportation Division. GoBus coordinates with Greyhound Lines, Barons Bus Lines, John Glenn Columbus International Airport, and other national and local transportation services. The buses are ADA accessible deluxe 50-person motor coaches. The system uses an affordable mileage-based fare structure.^{li}

Virginia

Virginia Breeze launched in 2017, and the state has since built out four routes radiating south from Washington, D.C. that have carried 220,000 trips; a fifth will launch soon. Virginia's Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) connects the routes with local public transit, airports, and with Amtrak and other intercity bus providers. Breeze Bus connected trips have grown by 53 percent since 2017. Like many of the other examples, Virginia uses Federal 5311 formula grants and contracts with private carriers.^{lii}

Washington State

Washington State DOT contracts with private bus operators to provide four intercity bus routes known as Travel Washington. This intercity bus service connects rural communities to major transportation hubs and urban centers, filling gaps in the public transportation network. The Federal Transit Administration provides funding for the program under the Formula Grants for Rural Areas 5311 program. This public-private partnership includes Federal 5311 funds and in-kind match by the operators by way of applying the value of unsubsidized connecting intercity bus service. Travel Washington provides more than 30,000 trips per year; the success has led to plans for further routes and extensions.^{liii}

Other States

- **Nevada.** Greyhound has a new Reno, NV to Salt Lake City service provided with State of Nevada financial support.^{liv}

- **South Dakota.** South Dakota DOT conducted a study that recommended 10 possible state-supported routes and increased bus frequency on two existing lines.^{lv}
- **Vermont.** The state-supported bus service (Vermont Translines) enhances schedule options and stops at numerous communities missed by the train, and provides train connections at Albany.^{lvi}

Multimodal Hubs, Coordination, and Partnerships

Atlanta, Georgia

Atlanta recently opened a new 14,000 square foot, two-story Greyhound Terminal including ticketing, operations, administrative office, lobby and restaurant. The architecturally striking facility is centrally located and intermodal. It has 8 intercity slips for Greyhound, Southeastern Stages, and Megabus; 2 MARTA bus stops; and a direct connection to MARTA rail. GDOT administered the project, using FTA 5311 funds that it accumulated over several years.^{lvii}

Boston South Station

Boston's South Station commuter and intercity rail terminal and bus terminal are two separate buildings, making connections between them inconvenient. The completion of the South Station Transportation Center will create direct weather-protected connections between rail, bus, subway, and parking. The bus capacity is being expanded by 50 percent. Additionally, a mixed-use tower is being constructed to provide office, residential, hotel, and retail space.^{lviii}



The effort is jointly run by the Boston Planning and Development Agency, Hines, and the MBTA. Several benefits and revenue streams include:

- The multi-phase and mixed-use development project will provide MBTA with an additional recurring income through bus gate fees and retail revenue;
- Creates approximately 6,600 direct construction jobs and \$413,100,000 in wages from salaries to construction workers;
- Generates approximately \$26,000,000 in estimated property taxes annually;
- Provides contributions to off-site affordable housing and provides on-site affordable housing;
- Contributes to the Neighborhood Housing Trust and Neighborhood Jobs Trust; and

- Converts the value of the air rights above South Station into significant, privately-funded transportation infrastructure improvements.^{lix}

Richmond, Virginia

After the closure of the Richmond, VA, Greyhound station by the owner, the City of Richmond allowed Greyhound to shift operations to the city-owned Main Street Station; this included use of a portion of the building.^{lx}

Salesforce Transit Center, San Francisco

The Salesforce Transit Center is a new regional transit hub in downtown San Francisco. Phase One of the project connects the bus services of AC Transit, WestCAT, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans, Lynx, Muni bus, Greyhound, and Amtrak/Capital Corridor Thruway bus service. The bus levels are directly connected to the Interstate highway system and the Bay Bridge via a ramp. It is near BART and Muni Metro



subway stations. Phase Two of the project will bring in Caltrain commuter rail service from the peninsula and eventually California High Speed Rail trains from Southern California into an underground station. The multi-level building (four stories above grade and two below) includes a rooftop public park, retail space, bicycle parking and administrative offices.^{lxi}

The station was built and is managed by the Transbay Joint Powers Authority (TJPA), which has primary jurisdiction with respect to all matters concerning the financing, design, development, construction, and operation of the Transbay Program. The TJPA is a joint exercise of powers authority created by the City and County of San Francisco, the Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District, the Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board, the California High Speed Rail Authority, and Caltrans.^{lxii} Funding for the project is provided through TJPA and includes federal grants, proceeds from the sale of state property in the area, loans, and local sources.^{lxiii} The development of the station also includes the development of surrounding property, with 4,000 housing units, 100,000 square feet of retail, a hotel, and a 61-story office tower.^{lxiv}

Regional Commuter Buses

Seattle Region

Sound Transit Express regional buses utilized spacious coaches to provide a service contracted out to Community Transit, King County Metro and Pierce Transit, who operate and maintain the coaches. The Express buses carry more than 54,000 people daily. The services use managed lanes, and Sound Transit funds transit centers and HOV access lanes along ramps from transit centers to improve bus flow.^{lxv}

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