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## GETTING BACK ON TRACK

### *Uncovering the Potential for Trains in Traverse City*

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JULY 2014



*There are many reasons why the Grand Traverse region is such a great place—not the least of which is its strong sense of community and “can do” spirit. The area has a proud history of identifying priorities and acting on them.*

***One emerging priority is passenger rail.***



*This report was prepared as part of the Michigal Land Use Institute's Thriving Communities program, which is building prosperous communities through good governance and community designs that put people first.*



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**Environment. Economy. Community.**



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The **Michigan Land Use Institute** is a nonprofit advocacy organization that protects the environment, strengthens the economy, and builds community. We collaborate with citizens, government, businesses, and organizations to innovate models for resilience and prosperity.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Imagine you're driving into Traverse City from the east, along M-72—marking the start of yet another summer vacation there.

You've heard that in Traverse City you can get around without the hassle of a car, so you park near the Turtle Creek Casino, walk to a kiosk next to the railroad tracks, and confirm that the next train to Traverse City leaves in seven minutes and arrives downtown in 28.

You swipe your card, grab your ticket, and board the train, not knowing what to expect: It's your first time on the brand-new, summer-only line connecting Acme to downtown TC.

First impressions are always crucial, and the new ride makes a good one. It's comfortable, smooth, and, you suddenly realize, quite freeing.

You don't stop at red lights. No one honks at you. As you sit at a table checking your phone, skimming the *Northern Express* and admiring the gleaming sailboats on East Bay, you smile at the long line of cars sitting on the highway, stuffed with vacationing families, waiting for traffic to move. You glide past some bicyclists on the TART Trail who are heading the same way, thinking you may see them soon in downtown Traverse City.



*Photo: MLUI*

*The 11-mile stretch of tracks from Traverse City to Williamsburg could one day make it easier for residents and tourists alike to get in and out of town.*

Before you know it, you're at the Eighth Street Station, where you can grab a quick lunch at the Filling Station. There's a bus stop nearby to connect you to downtown Traverse City and outlying towns. You also see bicycle rentals, taxis, and pedi-cabs offering to take you and your bags into town or to the Grand Traverse Commons. But today it feels good to stretch your legs and stroll down shady side streets toward the waterfront. By the time you meet up with your friends and head to the music festival on the bay, you are relaxed and ready to rock.

This vision could actually happen some day, This report explains why...and how.

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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There are many reasons why the Grand Traverse region is such a great place – not the least of which is its strong sense of community and “can do” spirit. The area has a proud history of identifying priorities and acting on them.

One emerging priority is passenger rail.

Residents clearly called for passenger rail during the Grand Vision process six years ago. More recently, when the state’s traveling “Michigan By Rail” forum came to Traverse City seeking input on the Michigan State Rail plan, it attracted more people than it did anywhere else in the state. And, across the state, the forums themselves revealed that Michigan residents ranked Traverse City No. 1 on a list of cities most in need of a new rail connection.

Feedback like that demonstrates that a train running along a freight route connecting Williamsburg and Acme to Traverse City via the south end of East Grand Traverse Bay could be popular with visitors and residents alike.

There are precedents elsewhere that Traverse City could follow. Other tourist communities have rebuilt old freight tracks or added new ones to provide passenger rail service.

That is why this report explores:

- The Astoria Riverfront Trolley in Astoria, Oregon—a vintage trolley running on former freight tracks along the Columbia River;
- The Kenosha Streetcar in Kenosha, Wisconsin—vintage electric-powered streetcars running on freshly-laid rail line;
- The Napa Valley Wine Train in Napa, California—an excursion dinner train fueled by natural gas;
- And the Music City Star in Nashville, Tennessee—a 32-mile commuter rail line that runs on existing freight tracks.

The Michigan Land Use Institute is examining alternatives and proposing different ideas to spark a vigorous community conversation and, ultimately, action to restore passenger trains in the Grand Traverse area. To be clear, there is no plan for developing a train in the region. This report is intended to get us closer to making that plan.

Researchers have explored different ways to bring train service back to Traverse City, including the possibility of year-round, regular, commuter service, but this report focuses on a more modest and, we



argue, more achievable first step: a seasonal, tourist-focused service that makes economic sense.

That may strike some rail advocates as overly cautious and too slow, but our analysis shows that such a train would boost tourism and contribute to a larger overall economic development strategy for northern Michigan, whose twin economic pillars are tourism and agriculture.

No matter the season, there are many benefits to passenger rail.

- A passenger train line would provide more options for traveling one of the busiest stretches of road between Acme Township and Traverse City. It could lower the car count along busy U.S. 31, which currently stands at about 25,000 cars a day—and is considerably higher during the summer.<sup>1</sup>
- It could fuel walkable, village-style growth in Traverse City's Eighth Street corridor, Williamsburg, and Acme Township.
- A train, as an attraction, would boost tourism and help draw people and businesses to northern Michigan.

The way forward is not easy, but it is very doable.

Even though the tracks are in adequate shape to handle freight, today only a few freight trains use the 11-mile stretch of tracks we are examining. Getting a passenger train running on that route will cost real dollars—\$1.7 million, to be precise—just to get the tracks smooth enough to handle people in addition to freight.<sup>2</sup>

Operating a train costs real dollars, too—anywhere from millions every year for full-fledged, year-round, daily commuter trains, to perhaps as little as \$100,000 a year for a summer, weekend, tourist-focused shuttle train.<sup>3</sup>

And while starting with only summer weekends sounds like a long, slow slog to fulltime commuter service, we believe the key to that larger goal is to get started now by building a tourism-based passenger line.

Community leaders should assemble funding from both the private and public sector to upgrade the tracks within the next three to five years, while forming partnerships that establish an operational and jurisdictional structure for running passenger trains. As demand by year-round residents for the service

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1 Michigan Department of Transportation 2012 Average Daily Traffic Map (<http://goo.gl/k8lk3e>)

2 Interview with Chris Bagwell, Project Manager for Great Lakes Central Railroad

3 Ibid.

## Traverse City to Williamsburg



grows beyond the summer months, the partnership should be ready to explore running a year-round service.

Train service on this 11-mile stretch could also trigger growth in another direction: reviving the line from downtown Traverse City that heads to tiny Grawn, then to Cadillac, and eventually to Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, or even metro Detroit. That would make a good start on the state rail plan's long-range vision of a passenger train connecting Traverse City to the rest of Michigan.

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## II. DEEP TRACKS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF RAIL IN TRAVERSE CITY

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Trains were already rolling in Michigan when it joined the Union in 1837; five railroads owned tracks connecting Toledo, Detroit, and Royal Oak. Over the next 70 years, rail companies laid thousands of miles of track. By 1905, Michigan boasted nearly 1,800 train depots and more than 9,000 miles of track.<sup>4</sup>

The first train pulled into the Traverse City Depot in 1872, carrying food and medical supplies. The line established a long-lasting, direct connection to Michigan's largest metropolitan areas like Grand Rapids, Battle Creek, and Detroit, as well as other Midwestern cities like Cincinnati and Chicago.

The new route spurred business growth at an unprecedented rate and made sweeping changes to the budding Up North economy. It opened up distant markets around the country and, eventually, all

over the world. Not only did the region gain reliable access to food and medical supplies, it was now able to export fruits and, more commonly, forest products like wood and paper.

Rail line owners added passenger trains the next year with a daily connection to Grand Rapids. Tourism boomed. For the first time, summer visitors from southeast Michigan, Chicago, and northern Ohio could ride the rails to northern Michigan's lakes, beaches, and cottages—a quantum leap over horse-powered transportation.

By 1900, thousands of visitors traveled to Traverse City each year.



*Source: Alan Loftis*

*The first train pulled into the Traverse City Depot in 1872. This photos shows how it looked in the early 1900s, by which time thousands of visitors traveled to the region through its doors.*

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<sup>4</sup> Michigan State Rail Plan, MDOT (<http://goo.gl/ZNtVuz>)



But through the 1940s, as road infrastructure and automobile technology started to predominate, freight and passenger rail service declined. Freight has survived, if only barely; passenger rail service to Traverse City expired in 1966.

Ten years later, in an act of genuinely wise foresight, the State of Michigan purchased the railroad right-of-way that connects to Petoskey in order to preserve what was left of the line and the rail connection to Traverse City. The state contracted with Michigan Northern Railway to manage the tracks.

In 1984, Tuscola and Saginaw Bay Railway, now Great Lakes Central Railroad Company, picked up the contract. Today the company leases the tracks from the Michigan Department of Transportation.

Over the past decade there have been some attempts to offer limited passenger rail in the Traverse City area, including a “Dinner Train,” which offered excursion train service through the scenic Grand Traverse area.

Today the remaining tracks are still operational for freight travel. They extend around the eastern side of Boardman Lake, connecting to Cadillac and, further on, to the Ann Arbor area. While that corridor is outside the scope of this presentation, its infrastructure should be considered when analyzing Traverse City’s true rail opportunities.

### III. STRONG SUPPORT FOR MICHIGAN TRAINS

While memories of northern Michigan’s railroad glory days mostly live on among local history buffs, interest in renewing the comprehensive train service the area once enjoyed is surprisingly widespread. In fact, at all levels—nationally, statewide, and locally—train interest is growing.

#### *Amtrak Ridership*

More people are riding Amtrak trains than ever before. Amtrak’s ridership has grown more than 50 percent since 2000. A record 31.6 million passengers rode on trains in the U.S. in 2013. In fact, 10 of the last 11 years have been record-breakers.<sup>5</sup>

## Traverse City Track- Owners Over Time

### 1872 – 1976

(During the first century of rail travel in Traverse City, the tracks saw multiple owners and mergers)

Traverse City Railroad Company  
leasing to the Grand Rapids and  
Indiana Railroad.

Pennsylvania Railroad

Pere Marquette Railway

Chesapeake and Ohio Railway

### 1976

State of Michigan purchases  
line, contracts with Michigan  
Northern Railway to manage  
tracks

### 1984 – Today

State of Michigan leases to  
Tuscola and Saginaw Bay  
Railway

### 2006

Under new ownership, TSBR  
becomes Great Lakes Central  
Railroad

5 Amtrak News Release: *Amtrak Sets Ridership Record and Moves the Nation’s Economy Forward*, (<http://goo.gl/Ql6Svv>)

### *Midwest High Speed Rail Plan*

The Midwest High Speed Rail Association has a vision for linking major Midwestern cities with fast, frequent, and dependable 220-mph train service. Traverse City could link to it, and to southern Michigan communities, via conventional rail.

### *Michigan's On Track*

In 2013, nearly 800,000 passengers rode Michigan trains. That's a 78 percent increase in ridership since 2002.<sup>6</sup> In response, the Michigan Department of Transportation is investing heavily in rail. Federal and state agencies spent nearly \$650 million to increase the speed of trains

traveling between Detroit and Chicago to 100 mph. Proposals and plans are also in place to explore a passenger train connecting Detroit, Lansing, Grand Rapids, and Holland; a commuter line connecting Ann Arbor with Detroit and Howell; and urban streetcars in Detroit and Grand Rapids.



Photo: MLUI

*When forum participants were asked to comment on a proposed Michigan State Rail Plan and to map possible rail routes, almost every proposed map included a train line from Traverse City to lower Michigan.*

### *Michigan By Rail and Michigan State Rail Plan*

In 2010, the Michigan Environmental Council and Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers held 16 forums to find out what the public thought about a proposed Michigan State Rail Plan. Officials asked participants to map important Michigan locations and possible rail routes. Almost every map included a train line from Traverse City to lower Michigan. In fact, it was the most consistent theme emerging from the sessions, held in every corner of the state. And when participants were asked where they want to see significant rail service improvements and expansion, they mentioned Traverse City more frequently than any other city in the state.

The Traverse City forum drew more than 100 people. That's more than any of the other forums, and in a town that lost all passenger rail service nearly a half-century ago.

### *The Grand Vision*

During the Grand Vision, a multi-year transportation and land use public visioning process involving six counties in northwest Lower Michigan, many residents were interested in restoring passenger

6 MDOT Passenger Rail Statistics (<http://goo.gl/GQENRI>)

rail to Traverse City. Since then, a Grand Vision committee, formed to advance rail topics in the Grand Traverse region, hosted two well-attended rail events. One highlighted New Mexico's commuter rail project, called the Rail Runner Express; the other highlighted Michigan's enhanced-speed rail network and two planned urban rail lines—the M-1 Rail Line and Washtenaw-Livingston (WALLY) Rail Line.

### *Master Plans*

The master plans of Acme Township and Whitewater Township, communities bisected by the little-used freight tracks, call for preserving the route for future passenger rail development. In fact, the Whitewater Township Master Plan suggests that if passenger train operations were restored, Williamsburg should be the final stop.

### *Festival of Trains*

Every year about 8,000 visitors flock to the Traverse City History Center for the annual Festival of Trains to check out model trains and celebrate the history of rail in Traverse City and all over Michigan.

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## IV. RESORT ROW AND DEMAND FOR TRAVEL

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Because there are no alternative routes, the US-31/M-72 highway corridor between Traverse City and the Williamsburg/Acme area is the region's most congested, especially in the summer.

With the Grand Traverse Resort, the Turtle Creek Casino, and a long list of hotels and motels hugging the shoreline of Grand Traverse Bay, a once-pleasant stretch of highway is now a traffic bottleneck—even a traffic nightmare, for visitors and residents alike.



*Photo: MLUI*

*About 25,000 cars travel along U.S. 31 between Traverse City and Acme every day—considerably more during the summer.*

Even when tourists are not in town, US-31 is clogged with about 25,000 cars a day, mostly carrying Antrim and Kalkaska commuters to their jobs in Traverse City. During the tourist season, the trip between Williamsburg and downtown Traverse City can take an hour.

That may be one reason why demand for local bus service along that route is rising. The Bay Area Transportation Authority's Williamsburg Village Loop carries almost 17,000 passengers a year.

The bottleneck likely helps bicycle traffic in the area, too: The Traverse Area Recreational Transportation

Trails, Inc. (TART Trails) operates a paved bicycle trail that extends from Traverse City to Bunker Hill Road, just short of Acme Township. More than 150,000 residents and visitors ride along the trail each summer as they travel the greater metropolitan area. Most use the trail for exercise or enjoyment, not getting to work, but as commercial activity increases, so could bicycle commuting.

More commercial activity is expected for the Acme-Williamsburg area. A new town center is planned near Acme Township's new public bayfront, and a commercial center is also planned for south of M-72, near Lautner Road.<sup>7</sup> The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians has plans to expand development near the Turtle Creek Casino and Hotel in the Williamsburg area. And with the Whitewater Township Master Plan calling for Williamsburg to become a "village center," a train station there could aid its development as a "pedestrian-oriented village."<sup>8</sup>

At the other end of the line, Traverse City's Eighth Street area is emerging as a new center for downtown development. A new affordable housing project is under way, and the Traverse City Corridors Master Plan finds significant potential for new, walkable, "mixed use" development in that area.<sup>9</sup>

Usually, when there's high travel demand, we talk about widening or adding roads. But MLUI's vision points to a less-expensive way to add travel capacity that, at the same time, creates a new tourism destination: train service.

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## V. STEEL RAIL BLUES: CURRENT CONDITIONS

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One big reason only freight trains are seen on the 11 miles of tracks between Williamsburg and Traverse City's Depot is that the tracks aren't good enough for hauling people.

They have the lowest track condition rating permissible for actual use—and then, only for freight. Significant upgrades are legally required before any kind of passenger train can use it.

The tracks carry just one or two freight trains per week, which is one reason the company maintains them at the lowest legal operational standard. The Federal Railroad Administration requires that speeds on that track must not exceed 10 mph.



Photo: MLUI

*The tracks between Williamsburg and Traverse City have the lowest condition rating permissible for actual use. Significant upgrades are required before passenger trains can travel the route.*

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7 Acme Township Community Master Plan 2014 (<http://goo.gl/69xBgh>)

8 Whitewater Township Master Plan 1999 (<http://goo.gl/jnXJ4X>)

9 City of Traverse City Corridors Master Plan (<http://goo.gl/laWKDQ>)



The track's road crossings need upgrades for passenger travel, too. The line crosses 18 different roads, including: Woodmere Avenue, Garfield Avenue, Airport Access Road, Three Mile Road, and Four Mile Road in Traverse City; and Holiday Road, Five Mile Road, Bunker Hill Road, Lautner Road, M-72, and Arnold Road in Acme Township.

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## VI. IN OTHER REGIONS, TOURIST TRAINS SPUR GROWTH

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Although the idea of operating commuter trains in the Traverse region strongly appealed to thousands of Grand Vision participants, the city and region simply do not have the population density and demand necessary to support a high capacity, year-round, light rail such as we see in cities like Chicago and Minneapolis.

But there are relatively low-cost ways to get a passenger train up and running that can provide many of the same benefits. Here are four examples of smaller communities that are using existing rail lines and traditional train cars to serve visitors and locals alike, and a look at emerging rail developments around Michigan:

### *Astoria Riverfront Trolley*

The Astoria Riverfront Trolley, in Astoria, Oregon, is a three-mile "heritage" streetcar line that operates in the small, oceanside town. It uses former freight railroad tracks running along or near the south bank of the Columbia River.

The line began operating in 1999, using a 1913-vintage streetcar from San Antonio, Texas, that was refurbished by the Trolley Riverfront Trolley Association for \$40,000.<sup>10</sup>

Streetcars and trolleys usually lack their own source of power, requiring overhead electrical lines or underground cables that can be expensive for small towns to install. So instead, Astoria decided to power their trolley's electric motor by attaching a diesel generator. This allowed them to stick with a traditional trolley but avoid the cost of wires.

When a generator powers the streetcar, though, speed is often sacrificed. Astoria's trolley runs no faster than 10 mph, so its seven-mile round trip excursion takes roughly 50 minutes.

In an unusual arrangement, about 45 volunteers from the nonprofit Astoria Riverfront Trolley Association operate the service and maintain the streetcar and tracks. The all-volunteer arrangement



*Photo: The Daily Astorian*

*The Astoria Riverfront Trolley in Oregon uses former freight railroad tracks.*

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<sup>10</sup> Email interview with Mitch Mitchum, board member of the Astoria Riverfront Trolley Association

allows the trolley to operate at an unusually low cost—about \$55,000 a year.<sup>11</sup>

The City of Astoria provides some funds for certain purchases; it helped purchase a new car barn in 2001 and, more recently, the streetcar itself, which had been on loan from San Antonio for the line's first seven years.

Together, these measures add up to some good news: Income from ticket sales and charter group trips cover the trolley's operational costs. The service now carries about 35,000 to 40,000 passengers, mostly visitors, every year; many locals see it as a symbol or icon of Astoria. It runs from noon to 6 pm, seven days a week, from Memorial Day to the end of October. During the rest of the year, it runs on weekends only, except for January and February when it shuts down for maintenance. A single ride costs \$1.



*Photo: Ron Zack*

*In Kenosha, Wisconsin, a 1.7-mile electric streetcar track connects downtown to a nearby development on Lake Michigan.*

#### *The Kenosha Streetcar*

About 100,000 people live in Kenosha, Wisconsin, located about 65 miles north of Chicago. In 2000, the city built a new, 1.7-mile electric streetcar track connecting its downtown to the Harborpark development on a peninsula jutting into Lake Michigan. The city built the streetcar circulator to support mixed-use development in that district, promote downtown businesses, and draw tourists. The short route also connects the downtown to the train line between Milwaukee and Chicago.

Kenosha's streetcar system is often recognized for its very low start-up costs, particularly for a new line. It lies mostly in an old industrial park and along a street median; both settings required only minimal excavation for the new tracks. The project—including the cars, streetcar track, a new transfer station, and a maintenance facility—cost around \$5 million.

Toronto, Ontario, helped keep costs down by donating a fleet of 1951-vintage Presidents Conference Committee streetcars to Kenosha. They may be old, but they operate year-round, running every 15 minutes between around 10 am and 5 pm, at an average speed of 8 mph.

Kenosha Transit owns and operates the streetcars, which are an official part of the city's transit system and are coordinated with the downtown's commuter train. Because the streetcar is part of the city's official transit agency, the system can access transit subsidies and government grants that otherwise would be unavailable.

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11 Email interview with Mitch Mitchum, board member of the Astoria Riverfront Trolley Association

When it's all added up, Kenosha's streetcars operate on an annual budget of about \$135,000 a year.<sup>12</sup>

Today, the Kenosha carriages carry about 60,000 passengers a year, and are the centerpiece of the downtown's transit-oriented development area. Because its tracks connect three museums, the Harborpark district, and the Metra station, it's key to the city's tourism, and a district that was once an abandoned industrial center now hosts an array of housing and commercial developments.

Pleased with these outcomes, local leaders there are now planning a two-mile expansion that will connect to 80 percent of the downtown's businesses.

### *Napa Valley Wine Train*

The Napa Valley Wine Train is a 36-mile long California train excursion owned and operated by a private company, the Napa Valley Railroad.

In 1984, when Southern Pacific Railroad abandoned a portion of its railroad tracks along scenic Highway 121 in the Napa Valley area, a group of community leaders formed a company to purchase and preserve the rail corridor in the hope of one day operating a passenger rail line.

They succeeded; a few years later, Vincent DeDomenico, the inventor of Rice-A-Roni, purchased the company—Napa Valley Wine Train Inc.—and several antique rail cars.

The company, which is still managed by the DeDomenico family, spent \$20 million to upgrade the tracks, secure the right-of-way, and buy the cars. However, further financial information, particularly about the company's annual operational costs, are unavailable because the company is privately owned.<sup>13</sup>

The wine train began service in 1989 after overcoming significant backlash from local activists and government leaders who opposed it due to what they said would be too much noise, pollution, and tourist traffic.

The railroad used several strategies to overcome objections: Its locomotives are partially or entirely powered by natural gas, sharply reducing their air emissions. The company only serves local, sustainably produced wine and food, a boon to local farmers and business owners. And train operators point out that their service measurably reduces auto traffic, noise, and air pollution because the passengers—about 125,000 each year—walk, instead of drive, to local destinations once they



*Photo: Napa Valley Wine Train*

*In California, tourists and wine-lovers can ride along a 36-mile route in the famed Napa Valley.*

<sup>12</sup> WTMJ News 4 interview with Kenosha, Wisconsin, Mayor Keith Bosman (<http://goo.gl/73ljcS>)

<sup>13</sup> Napa Valley Wine Train ([www.winetrain.com](http://www.winetrain.com))

disembark.

The three-hour train tour stops at several of the region's most notable vineyards and provides dinner and wine on board.

The Napa trains operate at less than 20 mph; tickets cost \$35 to \$150 per person for wine tour and dinner packages.



*The Music City Star in Nashville, Tennessee, is designed for commuters.*

#### *Nashville's Music City Star*

While Astoria, Kenosha, and Napa Valley benefit from their tourist-based lines, Nashville designed its train for everyday commuters. The Music City Star, a 32-mile traditional commuter line from Lebanon to Nashville, Tennessee, was not designed with tourists in mind.

Established in 2006, the line aimed to demonstrate the effectiveness of public rail transit and, hopefully, spur construction of six additional service lines radiating from downtown Nashville.

Transportation officials say that, as a commuter line, the Music City Star had lower than average start-up costs and has modest operational costs, but the operation still has a fairly large budget.

The Nashville Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) spent roughly \$40 million in startup costs to rehabilitate the tracks, build stations, and purchase refurbished passenger cars. Today it has an annual operational budget of \$4.3 million and serves about 1,500 riders a day, mostly commuters, who pay \$5 per one-way ride or use monthly passes.<sup>14</sup>

The train runs during regular commuter hours, as well as on Friday evenings, and connects to free, citywide bus lines at the terminating Riverfront Station. Ridership has increased more than 250 percent since 2007; encouraged by that growth, city leaders are now planning an additional, new line.

Leaders are also working on a transit-oriented development project at the other end of the existing line in Lebanon, Tennessee, which will include shopping and dining options. If it works, the project and the line will be synergistic—attracting growth to the area that, in turn, triggers more ridership.

Local leaders say coordination between city transit officials and developers aided the success and sustainability of the Music City Star.

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14 Music City Star experiences record year of ridership (<http://goo.gl/l3KnvS>)



*Closer to Home*

Michigan, too, is getting closer to developing its first commuter rail line. The Washtenaw-Livingston (WALLY) Rail Line, a 27-mile commuter rail line, would connect downtown Ann Arbor with Howell, Michigan. WALLY trains would run restored, double-decker cars on an existing freight rail line parallel to busy US-23. MDOT, which is committed to providing the commuter rail service for this project and for a Detroit to Ann Arbor commuter line, will conduct a WALLY feasibility study this year.

Michigan also has a number of scenic tourist trains, mostly in small towns with historic, unused rail lines, locomotives, and passenger cars. They mostly rely on volunteers for operation.

The Huckleberry Railroad, in Flint; the Little River Railroad, in Hillsdale; the AuSable Valley Railroad, in Fairview; Coopersville and Marne Railroad, in Coopersville; and the Steam Railroad Institute, in Owosso all run excursion trains during summer months using vintage and restored locomotives. These are just a few of the trains highlight the legacy of Michigan's historic rail infrastructure.

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## VII. A VISION FOR TC TRAINS

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Because regular commuter trains like Nashville's Music City Star and the WALLY must meet certain Federal Transit Administration standards, commuter rail would be too expensive for an initial train line in the Traverse City region, and is not now a realistic option.

However, with proper planning and strong partnerships, a tourist-focused shuttle train with lower start-up and operational costs and more flexible service could be a viable first step. Then, over time, as demand and population grow, commuter trains could become a more realistic option.

**“THIS COULD BE USED NOT ONLY BY THE TRIBE FOR WORKERS, BUT ALSO PATRONS OF THE RESORT AND CASINO WHO ARE ALSO STAYING IN DOWNTOWN.”**

*- Kim Pontius, Traverse Area Association of Realtors®,  
in the Traverse City Record-Eagle*

Commuter trains are expensive for many reasons, but a major one is meeting the important safety requirements established by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). The FRA has much higher safety requirements for commuter rail than for a tourist-based shuttle train. Because commuter trains are expected to carry more passengers, railroad staff must have significantly better training; tracks and train cars must use more advanced signal and communication systems; and train-road intersections must have more extensive infrastructure.

Those additional requirements add up to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of additional dollars for commuter trains.

A tourist-focused shuttle train would not have to meet all these requirements because it's not operating at the frequency of daily commuter trains. While commuter trains are intended to get workers to their jobs on a reliable, rigid schedule, tourist-focused shuttle trains are intended to get tourists, shoppers, and workers to a destination, mostly for entertainment and recreation. That means they typically operate on a more flexible schedule.

Tourist-focused shuttle trains would have another advantage: They could ease traffic along one of the busiest, most tourist-clogged sections of US-31 during peak hours. Like the region's TART Trail, which welcomes walkers, strollers, bikers, and bladders, visitors would use the train for fun, enjoying safe transportation to and from accommodations, recreation opportunities, festivals and downtown bars and restaurants.

Many people are drawn to unique travel experiences they can't find in other places. That's why the train would quickly become its own attraction, boosting economic development and tourism for the Grand Traverse region.

But some local folks, especially those working in hotels and restaurants along the 11-mile route, could use it, too.

### **Carriage Types and Power**

There are a number of train design options to choose from for a tourist-focused rail service.

#### *Vintage streetcars*

Places like Astoria and Kenosha believe charm can help attract both visitors and riders, so they operate "heritage" coaches—vintage trolleys and streetcars. Since streetcars run on electricity and typically lack internal power sources, they work best where overhead wires already exist.

That is not an absolute requirement, however: Astoria has no overhead wires, so a diesel generator attached to the trolley powers the car.

#### *Locomotives and passenger cars*

Some communities use traditional locomotives and passenger cars because they typically travel at higher speeds than streetcars. To avoid the high cost of brand new trains, Nashville's Music City Star and the Napa Valley Wine Train use restored cars donated or purchased from other commuter rail lines.

For example, MDOT will use restored, FRA-approved double-decker cars for the proposed 27-mile WALLY Line.

### **Stops, Stations and Connections**

A summertime Traverse City shuttle train could provide express or local service, depending on the time and need. In other words, the train could stop only at each end (Williamsburg and Traverse City), or make frequent stops along the way.

A Williamsburg station could spur economic development at the east end of the line, and work well with the Turtle Creek Casino and Hotel, if it was located near the casino's parking lot.

At the line's west end, the Traverse City Depot area could host a new boarding station. Its walkable proximity to downtown, neighborhoods, the library, restaurants, and the Eighth Street area would provide an excellent jumping off point to enjoy central Traverse City. But travelers could also reach the rest of the city from there, thanks to frequent service via Bay Area Transit Authority's Route 2.

In between those two end points, there are many destinations along US-31 that would benefit greatly from train service, starting with the Village at Grand Traverse, a proposed mixed-use village just west of Williamsburg. If plans to build commercial and recreational attractions along Acme Township's bay shore work out, that would justify a train stop near Bunker Hill Road, as well.

People staying at the many hotels along US-31—and campers staying at Traverse City State Park—would use stops in that area to travel to Traverse City or the casino.



Photo: Steve Morgan

*The Astoria Riverfront Trolley has modest boarding stations along its 3-mile route.*

The TART Trail offers hotel and restaurant patrons an alternative to busy US-31, affording strolls along the trail to potential, nearby train stops. The opportunity to avoid a congested, unsafe roadway with harrowing left turns and instead enjoy a walk in the park could become a draw for Traverse City tourism.

The stops and stations could vary in size, from the typical indoor space with bathrooms and an outdoor platform, to a small, semi-open, covered space with a ticket machine and informational kiosk. All boarding areas would be barrier-free

and accessible. Security, restroom, and maintenance needs would vary for each stop.

If free, safe parking were offered at the casino property adjacent to Williamsburg, travelers heading west could simply park, pay, and board the train.

Real-time train information would be crucial. If travelers know how long it will take for their train to arrive and then reach their destination, they can make good decisions about how best to get there. So, like the Astoria Riverfront Trolley, each kiosk could always display the train's current location.

Other stops besides the Traverse City Depot could offer connections to other transit "modes." For example, connecting to the region's TART Trail would allow bicyclists to jump off the train and pedal to their destinations. Opportunities for bike-sharing and bike rentals would encourage more visitor use of trains and trails.

It is also important that the train schedule meshes well with BATA's existing Route 2, which runs north and south between Traverse City's Cherryland Center and the downtown BATA Transfer Station. The route's buses currently stop on Woodmere Avenue, near the Depot property. With an efficient bus connection, train passengers can easily and quickly bus to their final destinations.

## **Schedule**

An advantage to having a tourist-based shuttle train is that it can operate much more flexibly, according

to seasonal and weekly demand. During big events like the National Cherry Festival, the Traverse City Film Festival, and Horse Shows by the Bay Equestrian Festival, schedules could adjust to accommodate more tourists.

Trains would operate during the busiest tourist travel times—all weekends from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Service could begin in the early afternoon on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays and run late into the evening.

It would offer five or six round trips a day starting in Williamsburg and ending in Traverse City, with at least one stop in between. The trip would likely take 40 minutes.

## **Operating Structure**

The many ways to manage train services and operations boil down to three basic approaches.

### *Local existing transit agency*

Kenosha Area Transit, that city's public transportation agency, manages the Kenosha Streetcar. This makes more federal and state funds available, since the streetcar is part of the city's normal public transportation service. The entire rail line is within Grand Traverse County, and the Bay Area Transportation Authority provides transit service within the county.

### *Nonprofit*

The Astoria Riverfront Trolley Association manages the Astoria Riverfront Trolley. Its volunteers operate the service and maintain the trolley and tracks, avoiding the cost of paid staff. Locally, there may be existing nonprofits that are interested in, or capable of, operating a train. A new nonprofit could also emerge.

### *A private operator*

The Napa Valley Wine Train is privately operated, so it can set its own price structure and service schedule. But it still must follow Federal Transit Administration and Federal Railroad Administration regulations.

## **Funding**

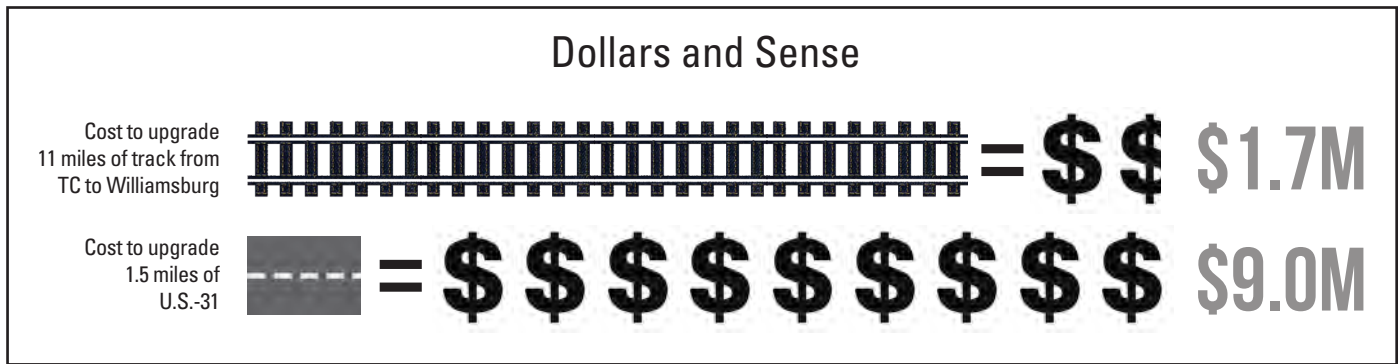
Funding a Williamsburg-to-Traverse City train will require a mix of private and public dollars. Fortunately, there are resources available for building and operating a new rail system.

### *Start-up costs*

Great Lakes Central estimates that it will cost roughly \$1.7 million to get the tracks in good enough shape to handle passengers: bolt tightening and replacement; railroad tie replacement; and road intersection safety improvements.

The cost of train cars is difficult to estimate because there are so many kinds to choose from—from bona fide antiques to functional double-deckers. Railroad operators, including Great Lakes Central, do lease locomotives and passenger cars, while a stand-alone streetcar would require special track modifications. So, costs for obtaining and refurbishing a train car and/or engine are unclear.





The cost of building boarding stations is also difficult to estimate, especially without established train stop locations. In Nashville, to keep start-up costs low, organizers kept their stations simple—typical bus shelters, albeit with informational kiosks. The Traverse City Depot already has platform boarding accommodations; plans for Turtle Creek Casino and Hotel or Williamsburg could incorporate similar train-boarding elements.

#### *Operation costs*

Once a new system is built—i.e., track restored, equipment purchased, stations built—we estimate that it would cost \$100,000 to \$200,000 a year to operate a summer-only, weekend shuttle train. That includes staff salaries, fuel, and train and station maintenance. Of course, as service levels increase, so do operational costs.

Sources to fund start-up and operating costs are varied:

- Traditional fundraising through solicitation of private donations and capital can be an effective way to cover a rail line's start-up costs.
- Crowdfunding is a new, innovative way to raise money for a project by using Internet tools to solicit contributions from individuals.
- Sponsorships would allow companies to contribute cash in return for advertising.
- Tax Increment Financing (TIF) could use increased property values near train stops to pay for system improvements.

#### **Further down the line**

Community leaders, over the long term, should also consider expanding passenger service beyond the immediate 11-mile line, which extends to Grawn and Cadillac, and, even further on, to the Ann Arbor area. In fact, the Michigan State Rail Plan recommends that the state explore re-establishing passenger rail service between the Grand Traverse area and the southern half of Michigan.

MDOT can look to the New Mexico Rail Runner Express as a model for connecting far-flung rural areas. When transportation planners in Santa Fe, having little room to expand busy I-25 between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, needed a way to ease traffic demand, they looked to the existing freight tracks just west of the highway. In 2006, state and regional transportation agencies restored old train cars,

upgraded the tracks, and built new boarding stations along the line. Today the 97-mile New Mexico Rail Runner Express serves thousands of commuters and tourists each day. And, because the train can travel faster than a car, local workers save time on their commutes.

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## VIII. FROM VISION TO REALITY

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This report is designed to raise more questions than it answers, provide a framework for posing those questions, and spark a broader conversation about re-establishing local train service in the Traverse City region. While daily, year-round commuter trains are a long-term goal, we first should establish a well-managed, tourist-focused shuttle train over next few years.

Then, as interest and demand rises, the community can explore establishing a traditional commuter rail service.

There are many opportunities for creative public/private partnerships that could launch a new passenger train service.

Tourism and economic development leaders will need to hold exploratory discussions with Great Lakes Central, business leaders, and commercial interests to research viable options. MDOT will be an important partner in any plans to expand rail service, as will local transportation agencies such as the Traverse City Transportation and Land Use Study (TC-TALUS), the Bay Area Transportation Authority, and the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments.

Other critical partners include the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians; tourism and festival leaders; TART Trails; and, of course, City of Traverse City, Acme and Whitewater Township officials, and business owners along the corridor.

The Michigan Land Use Institute is ready to advance these discussions, and encourage further exploration of the ideas introduced in this report.



A special thanks to other partners who have provided information for this report:

Acme Township  
Amtrak  
Ann Arbor Transportation Authority  
Astoria Riverfront Trolley Association  
Bay Area Transportation Authority  
City of Traverse City  
Disability Network Northern Michigan  
Federal Railroad Administration  
Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians  
Grand Vision Transportation Network  
Great Lakes Central Railroad  
Kenosha Area Transit  
Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers  
Michigan Department of Transportation  
Michigan Environmental Council  
Midwest High Speed Rail Association  
Napa Valley Railroad  
Nashville Regional Transportation Authority  
Traverse Area Recreational Transportation Trails, Inc.  
Traverse City Tourism  
Traverse City History Center  
Traverse City Area Transportation and Land Use Study  
Whitewater Township

