



ON TRACK

The E-Bulletin of the Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers

www.marp.org

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The Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers, Inc. (MARP) is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit corporation established in 1973 to improve passenger train service, travel conditions for passengers, and to work for the preservation of historic rail stations.

Member meetings are held at locations around the state. Check the website for dates and venues. The public is invited to attend.

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*The Michigan Passenger Editor and Webmaster, Larry Sobczak
ON TRACK Editor, Kay Chase*

2020 MEETINGS

22 February – Member Meeting
Dearborn Amtrak Station

14 March – Member Meeting
TechTown in Detroit
(Cancelled due to COVID-19)

09 May – Kalamazoo
(Cancelled due to COVID-19)

09 July– Virtual Member Meeting
via Zoom

18 July – Executive Committee
Durand Union Station

12 September
(Cancelled due to COVID-19)

17 October – 47th Annual Meeting
1st Congregational Church, Jackson
(Tentative)

12 December – Executive Committee
Planning Meeting TBA

Visit www.marp.org
Email marprail@yahoo.com

Tell Your Member of Congress

Amtrak Cuts in Service and Personnel Are Unacceptable

In a letter sent to Congressional leaders on May 25, Amtrak CEO Bill Flynn shared the full extent to which Amtrak ridership and revenue are down as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Flynn went on to outline a request for an additional \$1.475 billion in funding on top of the \$1.02 billion already made available to Amtrak in the CARES Act. At the same time, he proposes to reduce train frequencies and lay off 20% of the workforce.

This is a recipe for disaster. [Read Rail Passengers President & CEO Jim Mathews' thoughts on Amtrak's announcement.](#)

Mathews makes clear that, while RPA strongly supports the need to get Amtrak through this crisis, any additional funds must buy certainty for workers and passengers alike. Congress must assure that Amtrak has enough funding to maintain the necessary workforce to fully restore service once demand for travel recovers, to run all National Network long-distance trains at least daily, and to give certainty that state-supported services, such as those in Michigan and throughout the Midwest, continue to enjoy the synergies of a connected national system.

RPA asks that we write our members of Congress. When you do, tell your story of how these cuts would affect you and the service we enjoy here in Michigan. Tell your member of Congress you are joining the Rail Passengers Association in supporting a request for at least \$1.5 billion in supplemental funding for Amtrak in FY2021, but only on the condition that certain protections for passengers and workers are put in place, namely that Amtrak must:

- Use this public funding to prevent the mass elimination of jobs;
- Maintain daily service for long-distance trains, the minimum acceptable level of service;
- Provide a concrete plan to return service to pre-COVID levels when the pandemic passes.

[CLICK HERE](#)
TO MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

MARP In-Person Meetings on Hold until October

Due to continued uncertainties regarding the COVID-19 crisis, your executive committee has decided to wait until Fall to resume our regular membership meetings. We are tentatively planning to hold the 47th Annual Meeting in Jackson on October 17. Stay tuned for details of a virtual member meeting on July 9. In the meantime, we will do our best to keep you informed of passenger train news and events.

Please stay healthy and safe!

Rail Travel in the Time of Virus

By John Guidinger

On May 23rd, I decided that it was time to make a train trip from Jackson to Chicago and see first-hand what was happening on the trains during the virus pandemic. Here are my observations.

The Amtrak website has been slashed to a bare minimum. Gone are the PDF files showing the national train schedules. You must tell the computer where you are starting from and where you want to go. The computer will then give you the train times. So there is no easy way to plan cruises around the country by train guys not focused on going just from point A to B. (The airline guys are in charge now.) Also, if you enter incomplete or incorrect information there are no error messages. You must sense that something is wrong and find it on your own. Finally, the computer now shows very strange schedule choices, such as an alternative routing from Jackson to Chicago by way of the bus connection to Toledo the night before, staying overnight in Toledo, and then taking train 29 or 49 to Chicago the next day.

Train 351 arrived at Jackson 20 minutes late on the day I traveled. It has seemed always to be on time since the virus arrived. But, no problem, it arrived in Chicago about 15 minutes early. Except for Trains 351 and 352, the other trains on the Michigan corridor (350, 353, 354, and 355) have been suspended without comment on the Amtrak website, such as a reassuring note that this is only a temporary curtailment.

My train consisted of four Horizon coaches and an Amfleet café car. There were about 25 souls on the train seated at scattered locations in two cars, with two of the coaches closed off. Everyone, passengers, crew, even little toddlers, wore face masks throughout the trip. The café car was open with the normal menu, but they did not accept cash - credit cards only. And the café tables in the car were not to be used by passengers, so I ate my Jimmy Dean breakfast sandwich and drank my orange juice at my seat. Several times I cleansed my hands liberally from a bottle of hand sanitizer that I brought along.

The train shed and interior of Chicago Union Station were practically empty. The main waiting room in the "Great Hall" was closed off. The Metropolitan Lounge was open and I gained access using the last of the free cards mailed to me from Amtrak after I slipped down from "Select Plus" to ordinary "Select" status due to not traveling as much last year. I counted three other people in the lounge. Signs were up at the food counter saying that they were sorry, but no snacks and drinks were being offered. Not even coffee! In the food court upstairs, only McDonalds was open and only for take-out. I sat alone, feeling very forlorn on a hard bench outside the Metropolitan Lounge trying to eat my Big Mac.

The return trip to Jackson was a little better. After boarding, and while waiting to leave the station, I watched an Amtrak employee with a portable spray tank and hose going through a train on the adjacent track apparently sanitizing the interior of the cars. My train left on time with about 40 souls. Out the window I noted that the street traffic in south Chicago looked normal. The train ran at speed all the way to Porter without any slow-downs or stops on *Norfolk Southern* (a first for me).

At New Buffalo, we stopped for 25 minutes to wait for time. The crew on the train was young and accommodating to the passengers. Most of us got off there for a few minutes and I chatted with the engineer who was standing alongside his new Siemens *Charger* (No. 4617). These engines are quiet enough to talk alongside. He said that he prefers the GE locomotives and thinks that the new *Charger* locomotives are over-engineered and too complicated. He seemed concerned that the cab was down lower to the ground. I asked him about crashworthiness. He said that a *Charger* recently hit a cement mixer at a grade crossing, but the cab had held up so well that the two men in the cab were not seriously injured.



Eastbound Amtrak Train #352 paused briefly at New Buffalo MI on May 23. Because the train was about 15 minutes ahead of schedule, passengers had a few minutes to get off the train to enjoy the sunshine and the fresh spring breeze wafting in from Lake Michigan. *Photo by John Guidinger.*

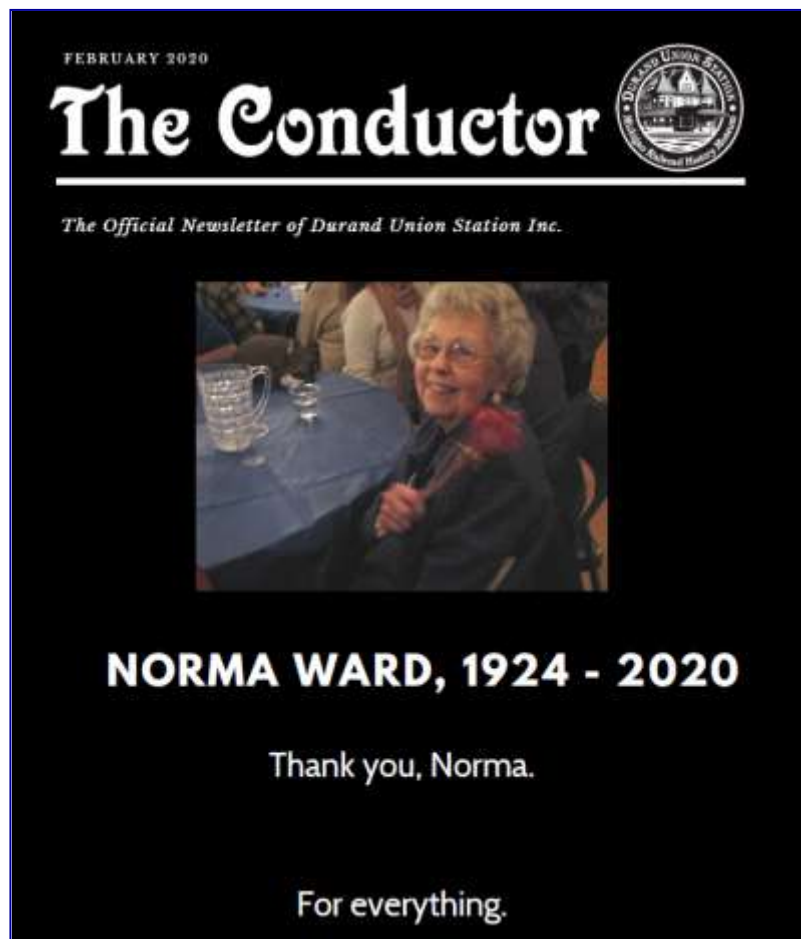
(TRAVEL continues on next page)

(*TRAVEL* continued from page 2)

I took a photo of the engine at New Buffalo. It was a very nice little stop in the spring air and sunshine.

The rest of the trip to Jackson was uneventful. Almost no one got on or off at Kalamazoo and we were in and out of this normally busy station in 15 seconds. We had to wait again 15 minutes for time at Battle Creek. After I left the train at Jackson, the train waited in the station another 5 minutes for time.

Would I suggest riding the train right now with the virus issues unresolved? Well, the train crews ride the train every day. And it worked well enough for me, although it seemed much of Chicago was still closed and my ears were sore after 4 hours from the elastic bands on my face mask. But, you can be the judge. Perhaps (except for being usually on time) this may be the future of train travel for a long time.



Union Station, Inc., sent a message to friends of the Depot that included this tribute: "It is a wonderful bit of irony that on the day Norma left us...we were setting up to host a free Kids' Night at the Depot, which ultimately saw 125 new visitors and delighted so many children. That is what Norma wanted all along, and that is who this building is preserved for.

"This building is not mine. It is yours. I am just taking care of it until you're old enough to do so for the next generation." –Norma Ward

Amtrak's loyalty to Durand and its Depot were crucial to the early years of restoration, and Amtrak remains Durand Union Station's oldest tenant in the building, operating passenger trains in Durand uninterrupted since the start of the *Blue Water Line* in 1974. Passengers leave for Chicago at 8:00 in the morning and return at 9:30 at night every day, 365 days a year—even during a pandemic!

The Legacy Will Live On

The community that occupies and surrounds Durand Union Station lost its "North Star" in February when Norma Ward passed away just short of her 96th birthday.

Without Norma Ward, today's train passengers would be disembarking at one of those infamous "Amshacks" instead of at Michigan's most lovingly restored and meticulously maintained rail station. Norma was there when the wrecking crew was about to demolish the building. She was there when the yet-to-be refurbished depot lacked heat and lights and she corralled a cadre of drivers to shine their car headlights to guide passengers alighting from the night train. She led the charge to raise funds for restoration, then rolled up her sleeves to dive in and clean up years of neglect. Norma had a vision for the Depot as a center of community activity. The activity when the depot recently reopened after the COVID-19 lockdown seems a validation of that dream.

Norma was a member of the Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers almost from day one. In addition to her four decades of work on behalf of Durand Union Station, Inc., serving for a time as its Director, Norma spent nine years working for Durand Schools and also did volunteer work for Loaves and Fishes.

Mary Warner-Stone, the executive director for Durand



Norma was recognized during MARP's 40th Anniversary, on 14 Sep 2013, for her role in saving Durand Union Station and for her many years of service as a tour director for America By Rail. Jim Wallington made the presentation.



Regional Briefing: Front Range Corridor **JUNE 24TH**

3 PM Eastern / 1 PM Mountain



Rail Passengers Webinar #2

In May, many of you enjoyed the round-table discussion between Rail Passengers President Jim Mathews and Congressman Seth Moulton of Massachusetts that focused on the Representative's **ambitious plan for high-speed rail in the United States**. Next up in this series of webinars is a presentation by Randy Grauberger, the project director for Colorado's Front Range Passenger Rail Commission, which is working to connect the Denver-Pueblo corridor to the Southwest Chief route. You will also learn of the key victories for passenger rail in the \$58 billion **TRAIN Act** approved by the House Transportation & Infrastructure committee on June 18 and scheduled for a full House vote before July 4.

[PLEASE RSVP HERE FOR THIS FREE EVENT](#)

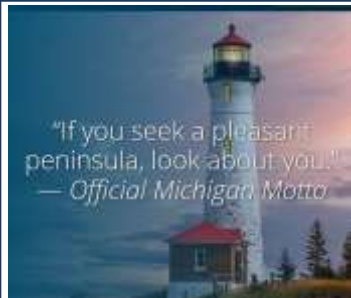
Get in on the Action!



Pictured above is the FAST 261 Michigan Avenue bus stopping at the Dearborn Transit Center on the way to Metro Airport.
Photo by Steve Sobel

Metro Area Express Buses Set **FAST** Pace

While many transit systems across the country have seen declining ridership, SE Michigan's SMART system reported a 20% increase in the period 2018-2019. Much of this growth stems from the **FAST** bus service initiated in 2018 on three of SMART's busiest corridors: Woodward, Michigan and Gratiot Avenues. On average, there were 5,000 additional riders every weekday on the **FAST** corridors compared to pre-**FAST**. Demonstrating, once again, if you build it, they will come.



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