



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.

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

MARP EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 2020-2022

John Guidinger	Chair
Open	Vice-Chair
Jeanie Merckel	Treasurer
Kay Chase	Acting Secretary
Steve Vagnozzi	Gov't/Public Affairs Coordinator
Jeanie Merckel	Membership Coordinator
Kay Chase	Communications Coordinator
Chuck Merckel	Meetings Coordinator
Robert Patterson	Detroit/Metro Region Chair
Open	Northern Region Chair
Open	West Region Chair
Open	East/Central Region Chair

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
Planning Session

10 September – Virtual Member Meeting
Guest: Clark Harder
Michigan Public Transit Assoc.

17 October – 47th Annual Meeting
via Zoom

19 November – Will be rescheduled

16 December – Executive Committee
via Zoom

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Email marprail@yahoo.com

Season's Greetings



There will be no singing of carols or savoring of delectable cookies from the kitchens of the ladies of the **Four Flags Garden Club**. But the ladies have carried on the 28-year tradition of decorating the historic **Amtrak Depot in Niles** to welcome visitors to their community and brighten the spirits of those waiting to board their train for adventures elsewhere. The tradition of decorating the depot for Christmas began in 1990 when a scene for the movie "Only the Lonely," featuring John Candy, was shot at the depot. When the filmmakers left, they left the lights, and the Garden Club members and the community joined together in a campaign to keep the lights burning each holiday season. For now, hope runs high that December 2021 will see the return of the **Annual Hometown Christmas Celebration**.

*All of us on the MARP Executive Committee
wish you and yours a safe and warm
holiday season.*

MARP Elects New Chair at 47th Annual Meeting

In the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, MARP's 47th Annual Meeting was held "virtually" on 17 October with some three dozen members and guests present.

The Keynote Speaker was **Gene Skoropowski**, widely recognized for making the *Capitol Corridor* service from San Jose to Sacramento a model

of success (increasing frequency from 6 to 16 trains each day) and then leading the development of the *Brightline* service in Florida.

Skoropowski came to the *Capitol Corridor* with a mandate to build the ridership and create a better relationship with Union Pacific. He recognized that he must bring to the table something of value to the host railroads. Securing public funding to bring the route up to Class V standards was a priority for passengers and, not incidentally, of benefit to the host railroad. This "one industry" approach to meld freight and passenger interests in a true public-private-partnership created a situation in which the *Capitol Corridor* is no longer viewed "as a squatter occupying host railroad property at less than market rates" (as Amtrak is viewed generally). Why hasn't this model been replicated elsewhere? Answer: the failure of Congress to supply sufficient capital funding. Lessons for Michigan include securing sufficient funding to maintain track at a high level, as well as acquiring more rolling stock to support increased service.

During Q & A, Skoropowski highlighted the importance of **States for Passenger Rail** in allowing state DOTs that contract for Amtrak services to share information and, thus, respond quickly when action is needed at the federal level. Asked what lessons *Brightline* has for Michigan, Skoropowski pointed out that *Brightline* is doing what the railroads did 100 years ago: creating real estate and economic value spurred by availability of rapid, convenient transportation, what today is called transit-oriented development (TOD). Michigan should assess development opportunities around stations, but localities must take the lead in providing sweeteners such as tax increment financing or other incentives.

Former 7th District Congressman, Joe Schwarz, spoke to members about Michigan legislative matters, bemoaning the partisanship and apparent lack of interest in supporting passenger rail. While Michigan has made a significant investment in the *Wolverine* line, there are still only three daily round trips. Greater infrastructure investment over the next decade is needed to realize the full potential of the line. He admonished MARP to be aggressive in lobbying for more and

(ANNUAL continues at right)

MARP 2021 Meeting Schedule

Due to the continuing COVID-19 crisis, MARP has suspended in-person meetings indefinitely. We urge you to **get acquainted with Zoom** as meetings will be held using this platform. The Executive Committee will continue to meet via Zoom at 7:00 pm on the third Wednesday of the month. If you have ideas to contribute, send them to us at **marprail@yahoo.com**. If you would like to participate in the meetings, please contact MARP Chair John Guidinger at **jhguidinger1@yahoo.com**.

(ANNUAL continued from column one)

better service: talk to lawmakers, be positive, have accurate figures on what money is needed for track improvements and rolling stock, and be prepared to wait a decade to get where we want to be. He suggested a tactic he utilized when he was in the legislature: get a supportive lawmaker to hold public hearings. Summing up, he said, "It takes money, a lot of lobbying, and persistence."

During the brief business meeting following the speakers, members gave unanimous approval to the slate of officers for 2020-2022 as presented: **Chair** John Guidinger, **Vice-Chair** Joshua Hamilton, **Secretary** Kay Chase, **Executive Committee At-Large Members** Kay Chase, Chuck Merckel, Jeanie Merckel, Steve Vagnozzi, and **Detroit-Metro Regional Chair** Robert Patterson. There were no candidates for the North, West, and East/Central Regional Chair positions.

Treasurer, Steve Vagnozzi, reported a 30 September bank balance of \$19,958, on income of \$7,212 and expenses of \$3,189. The Pratt Fund (Vanguard investment) stood at \$31,910.

Vagnozzi also relayed information from Jeff Martin, MDOT Office of Rail, that July-September ridership was down more than 50% compared to the same period in FY2019. On the upside, the **Midwest's new Siemens "Venture" cars** have begun arriving in Chicago and are expected to be in revenue service in Illinois in the first quarter of 2021.

Clark Charnetski reported that the Ann Arbor station has had improvements to the seating, ticket counter and restrooms. The new Ann Arbor City Council appears more favorable to building a new station and must be ready to move ahead when final FRA approval is given and funding becomes available.

MARP ended the year with more than 200 members in good standing. With outreach activities severely limited by the COVID-19 pandemic, only nine new members came aboard in 2020. Two of those new members live out-of-state, one in Oregon and the other in Texas. Interestingly, our new Lone Star State member owns property in the Traverse City area, rides the *Texas Eagle* on frequent visits to Michigan, and is enthusiastic about the **A2TC Project**.

Come Zoom With Us

It's easy! And, it's a great way to keep up to date with MARP and other organizations in which you have an interest, as well as to stay in touch with family and friends while social distancing is still the order of the day.

Here is a brief tutorial to help you [Learn How to Join a Zoom Call for the First Time](#). We look forward to "seeing" you at the next virtual MARP meeting.



Rail Passengers Association Presents

RPA will kick off the New Year on Wednesday, January 27, at 2:00 pm eastern, with the ninth in their series of very informative webinars, this one focused on the State-Supported Services. Presentations will be made by representative of three groups that have championed expansion of passenger rail in their regions—New England, the Midwest, and Kansas/Oklahoma/Texas, respectively: [Train Riders Northeast](#), [Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission](#), and [Northern Flyer Alliance](#).

Registration is required and must be submitted by close of business on Monday, January 25.

CLICK HERE TO REGISTER

You may submit your topic specific questions to Madi Butler at mbutler@narprail.org to be answered during the event. Questions are due by Friday, January 22.

Did you miss Webinar #8 on 16 December featuring [@railroadworkers'](#) Ron Kaminkow & [@smartunionworks'](#) Brian Eden focused on the Passenger Rail and Transit Workforce? You may view this and all past webinars at railpassengers.org/webinars.

BREAKING NEWS

Congress has passed a \$900 billion emergency coronavirus funding measure that includes \$1 billion for Amtrak and \$14 billion for transit and will prevent further service cuts and layoffs to the nation's railroads and transit agencies. You can read more about the bill in Rail Passengers [Mid-Week Brief for 23 December](#). As stated by RPA "The legislation doesn't address all the needs outlined by Amtrak and transit agencies, but it does stop the bleeding" and will allow them to avoid worse case scenarios. After a few days of quibbling over certain of the bill's provisions, the President has now signed the bill into law.

MARP Remembers Two Who Have Left Us

MARP was saddened to learn of the recent deaths of two long-time members. Both Richard and Al had worked quietly, but steadfastly—and largely on their own initiative over many years—to aid passengers and support better train service in our state.

Richard Pekarek and his wife, Joyce, raised their family in Grand Blanc. He worked as a Reliability Engineer for GM and other auto makers for 40 years. He was always interested in trains and was the 372nd person to join MARP many years ago. Richard had many other interests, among them big band music, playing the piano, Broadway musicals, and dancing, and was conversant on a wide array of subjects. **He died 28 November at the age of 90.**



Al Koole, on the left in the picture below, had just presented a model of the *Pere Marquette Engine 1225* to Rich Kay, in recognition of Rich's service as an engineer on the present day *Pere Marquette* line between Grand Rapids and Chicago. This gesture was characteristic of Al's thoughtfulness and caring. Al was a volunteer caretaker at the Grand Rapids station for many years and many who caught the train there



encountered Al's greetings and helpfulness. Al worked for 34 years for Steelcase, Inc. as a truck fleet driver, racking up 4.5 million accident-free miles. This remarkable record was recognized with

commendations from both the American and Michigan Trucking Associations, USDOT, and Michigan Senate Resolution 583. In his leisure moments, Al listened to his favorite radio programs, including "Pipedreams with Michael Barone" and "A Prairie Home Companion." **Al passed away on 26 November at the age of 77.**

17th Annual

Southwestern Rail Conference

28 January 2021 Video Conference

EARLY BIRD REGISTRATION IS JUST \$49

View from elsewhere . . .

“On a recent trip from New York to Boston, I flew up and took the train back to see which one was a better option during the pandemic, and surprised even myself by preferring the rail journey over flying. As an aviation enthusiast first and foremost, I never thought I'd be singing Amtrak's praises as the company and its services aren't always perfect, but I am going to. Here's why I'd choose Amtrak again for the 200-mile journey.”

--Thomas Pallini, who covers business news and airlines for *Business Insider*, tells why he found Amtrak **a great travel choice for a pandemic.**

“Relying on stopgap ‘flexible’ meals is an understandable necessity during the pandemic. But repeating the same options...four or five times on the same trip, with more of the same for anyone connecting from another train, can't be sustained indefinitely — not when sleeping car passengers pay more than \$400 per night...The perfunctory food offerings diminish and devalue a travel experience that Amtrak has already seen attracting new customers during the pandemic.”

-- Bob Johnston, in a five-part series for TRAINS News Wire **recounting his onboard experiences** on a recent cross-country Amtrak journey.



CP Completes Purchase of Detroit River Tunnel

Canadian Pacific has announced that it will acquire the remaining 83.5% stake in the Detroit River Rail Tunnel from OMERS Infrastructure, an arm of the benefit pension plan for Ontario municipal employees. CP previously owned a 16.5% stake in the tunnel. The purchase price for the remaining stake is \$312 million, subject to closing adjustments, CP officials said in a press release. CP officials said the acquisition will reduce the railroad's operating costs related to traffic movements through the tunnel. OMERS first invested in the Detroit River Tunnel partnership in 2001.



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