



November 13, 2023

Proposed Chicago-Detroit-Windsor-Toronto Service

The Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers (MARP) strongly supports new through passenger rail service between Chicago and Toronto VIA Detroit. We understand that Amtrak and VIA are jointly proposing a new service on the following schedule:

Eastbound

Amtrak Train 350

LV Chicago 0645 (CT)

Ar Windsor 1329

VIA Train 76

Lv Windsor 1429

Ar Toronto 1830

Westbound

VIA Train 73

Lv Toronto 1130

Ar Windsor 1545

Amtrak Train 355

Lv Windsor 1645

Ar Chicago 2125 (CT)

We understand that both existing Amtrak Trains 350 and 355 would be shifted from serving Pontiac to serving Windsor VIA the CPKC rail tunnels under the Detroit River. A new international station would be built at Michigan Central Station at the west mouth of the tunnels, now owned by Ford Motor Company. Eastbound, Train 350 would travel from Chicago through the rail tunnel and pass over a rebuilt Essex Terminal Railroad for about 4 miles to reach the existing VIA Rail Station in Windsor. Amtrak Train 350 would terminate there, and passengers would leave the train and pass through a new customs inspection facility and then board VIA Train 76 to continue on to Toronto. Westbound passengers would travel on from Toronto on VIA Train 73 to Windsor where they would leave that train and pass through customs and then board Amtrak Train 355, which would take them on to the international station in Detroit and on to Chicago. Through ticketing would be provided by VIA and Amtrak.

MARP believes that, while not perfect, this seems to be a very workable solution to adding badly needed rail passenger service between the major population centers of Chicago, Detroit, and Toronto. We have always believed that this service should operate via Detroit instead of on the former route via Port Huron, which has much less population.

We note that the cooperation of CPKC, owner of the tunnel, has greatly advanced this service. We wish other railroads were as cooperative toward developing passenger rail services. We compliment Amtrak and VIA for taking the initiative themselves and pressing forward with it.

We also note that this should greatly increase ridership on Amtrak Trains 350 and 355, which seem to be the weakest in terms of ridership of the six trains on the Chicago-Detroit/Pontiac corridor. We are also encouraged to see Michigan Central Station return to limited use for rail passengers, and we sincerely appreciate the willingness of Ford to allow this use as they restore this magnificent building, widely cherished in Detroit, as a center for high tech automobile design.

But, we have some concerns. Detroit's Amtrak Station on Woodward Avenue and the communities of Royal Oak, Troy, and Pontiac will lose two of the six trains to Chicago. This loss will be felt in these communities. However, we strongly support the diversion of these trains to Michigan Central Station and avoiding the time consuming and clumsy need to back the train four miles from the Woodward Avenue Station to reach the tunnel. The solution to retaining service to downtown Detroit and the other communities is contained in MARP's proposal to improve service to the eastern portion of the Michigan Rail Corridor by adding two new round trips on the corridor.

We wish this was a through train between Chicago and Toronto without forcing passengers and luggage to change trains in Windsor. We hope that a through train can eventually be implemented similar to the other international rail passenger border crossings between the US and Canada. We do not understand that, with all the new information and screening technologies, why modern customs inspections cannot be handed onboard a through train as was done for decades on trains across this border in the past. We have always felt that rail passengers are discriminated against compared to driving over the border.

We note that only one hour is allowed for customs in Windsor and we are concerned that this may be overly optimistic. Our experience is that international border crossings by rail usually require up to two hours, especially if issues arise. Simplifying and speeding the border crossing is of utmost importance in making the train competitive with the ease of driving across the border in a car. Because of the customs delays, we question if there will be many passengers boarding at Detroit for Toronto or at Windsor for Chicago on the new train because of the comparative ease of driving over the border and boarding the train at the opposite location.

We note the continual late running of Train 350 (averaging 30 minutes late and over an hour at times) and we seriously question the ability of Amtrak to deliver this train on time to Windsor. Meanwhile, we note the strong effort to achieve on time performance on the VIA system. We strongly fear that VIA will be forced to pad the schedule at Windsor to provide on time performance to VIA passengers between Windsor and Toronto. This has been done on the New York-Toronto route at Niagara Falls, Ontario. Adding an hour of padding at Windsor will seriously damage the competitiveness of the new train versus simply driving to Toronto. Amtrak must deliver train 350 on time at Windsor and do it consistently.

Finally, we note that the new train has not been funded. We also note that the majority of the \$44 million estimated cost of the new service is needed for construction in Canada for track improvements on the Essex Terminal Railroad and new customs facilities at the Windsor VIA

Station. We wonder if the new US Infrastructure funding can be used for improvements in Canada or whether we will have to wait for Canadian funding action. We hope that expedited efforts can be made to fund the improvements needed for the train to get into service as soon as possible.

However, despite these concerns, MARP strongly supports this initiative. This train would finally reconnect three major population centers in North America with rail passenger service. We hope that it will succeed and lead to strong growth in modern passenger rail service in Michigan and Ontario.

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