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# CHICAGO TO IOWA CITY INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE

## FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

### 1.1 BACKGROUND

The Illinois Department of Transportation (DOT) and Iowa DOT have evaluated alternatives for the reestablishment of passenger rail service between Chicago, Illinois, and Iowa City, Iowa (the Project), which is part of the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI). The DOTs, in conjunction with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), have determined that this part of the MWRRI would comply with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) (42 United States Code [USC] 4321 et seq.) through two tiers of analysis: first, a Tier 1 Service Level analysis, and subsequently, Tier 2 Project Level analysis. (See Section 1.5 of the September 2009 Environmental Assessment [EA] for more information on the procedural history of the Project.)

An EA and Supplement to the EA have been prepared by Illinois DOT and Iowa DOT to fulfill requirements of the Tier 1 Service Level analysis. The EA and Supplemental Information evaluate both the initial service (two round-trip trains per day [TPD]) and the ultimate build-out proposed in the MWRRI (five round-trip TPD) as well as the two alternative routes and the No-Build Alternative (see Section 1.3 for a summary of the alternatives). The August 2010 Supplement provides additional information on the Eola Yard and Wyanet Connection and updates to the information presented in the September 2009 service level EA where appropriate. At this time, Illinois DOT and Iowa DOT are proposing only the initial service on the route from Chicago to Iowa City. The operating agreements with the host railroads and Amtrak address only the initial service level. Any future increase in service levels will necessitate additional compliance with NEPA.

For the initial service level, Tier 2 Project Level analysis will be required for specific activities needed to implement the Chicago to Iowa City passenger rail service. These project level activities include the evaluation and selection of specific station locations and designs, identification and evaluation of specific track improvements, and evaluation of the location of specific construction activities such as sidings and new connecting track.

The Project area evaluated in detail for the two build alternative routes consists of existing rail corridors between Chicago and Iowa City. The proposed build alternatives include combinations of the existing freight and passenger lines of Amtrak, Northeast Illinois Rail Corporation (Metra), BNSF Railway Company (BNSF), Canadian National Railway Corporation (CN), CSX Transportation Company (CSXT), and Iowa Interstate Railroad (IAIS). One new connection will be required in Wyanet, Illinois, for the Preferred Alternative (Route A – Amtrak-BNSF-IAIS), which will require acquisition of approximately 7 acres of land for new right of way (ROW).

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## 1.2 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the Project is to reintroduce passenger rail service in Iowa City and the Quad Cities (Rock Island, Moline, and East Moline, Illinois; and Davenport and Bettendorf, Iowa) to increase regional mobility, reduce roadway congestion, meet future travel demands, and provide an affordable alternative mode of transportation for the communities served.

The Project would serve the following needs: to reduce the congestion and the transportation-related effects of continued population growth over the long term; to provide a transportation alternative for tourists to the Quad Cities area, University of Iowa students, and patients destined for the nationally recognized hospitals in Iowa City; and to provide a modal alternative for travel from Chicago to Iowa City through the Quad Cities.

## 1.3 ALTERNATIVES

Illinois DOT and Iowa DOT identified the No-Build Alternative and two build alternatives for detailed evaluation in the EA. The alternatives were evaluated based on their ability to meet the Project purpose and need, to satisfy engineering design criteria, and to avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts.

The No-Build Alternative would consist of operating the current trackage and continuing the present level of maintenance; there would be no appreciable change to current track configuration or operating conditions. The No-Build Alternative would not meet the Project purpose and need because it would not reestablish passenger rail service in the Quad Cities or Iowa City, provide an attractive alternative to highway or airline travel, or reduce congestion of these modes of transportation in the area from Chicago to Iowa City through the Quad Cities. The No-Build Alternative was retained for detailed analysis to allow equal comparison to the two round-trip TPD and five round trip TPD scenarios and to help decision-makers and the public understand the consequences of taking no action.

In addition to the No-Build Alternative, Illinois DOT and Iowa DOT evaluated two alternatives for providing passenger rail service from Chicago to Iowa City. Both build alternatives would use a combination of existing passenger rail and freight rail alignments.

The Route A Alternative would connect Chicago's Union Station to Iowa City using rail lines owned by Amtrak, BNSF, and IAIS. This alternative would require construction of an additional mainline track and new or reconfigured crossovers in Eola Yard, and a new connection between the BNSF and IAIS rail lines near Wyanet. The Route A Alternative would reestablish passenger rail service to Geneseo, Illinois; the Quad Cities (a proposed Amtrak station at Moline); and Iowa City. In addition, the Route A Alternative would provide expanded passenger service to the existing stations in La Grange Road, Naperville, Plano, Mendota, and Princeton, Illinois.

The Route B Alternative would connect Chicago's Union Station to Iowa City using tracks owned by Amtrak, CN, Metra, CSX, and IAIS. The Route B Alternative would not require any new connections. It would provide passenger rail service to Morris, LaSalle, and Geneseo; the Quad Cities (a proposed Amtrak station at Moline); and Iowa City. In

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addition, the Route B Alternative would provide expanded passenger service to the existing station in Joliet, Illinois.

#### **1.4 BENEFITS OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE**

Both the Route A and Route B alternatives would reestablish passenger rail service between Chicago and Iowa City, diverting a substantial number of passengers from automobiles and other vehicles to passenger trains, and providing some congestion relief on the regional highway system. Illinois DOT and Iowa DOT selected the Route A Alternative as the Preferred Alternative because it requires fewer miles of track improvements, is a shorter and faster route, provides better ridership, has fewer adverse environmental impacts, and provides more benefits than the Route B Alternative.

Because of the more competitive travel time, the Route A Alternative would attract a higher ridership than the Route B Alternative. While the Route A Alternative would require construction of an additional mainline track and new or reconfigured crossovers in Eola Yard and a new connection at Wyanet, it requires fewer improvements to the track structure and grade crossings than the Route B Alternative. Almost half of the Route A Alternative (110 miles out of a total of 219 miles) currently supports 79 mile-per-hour intercity passenger service and would not require any improvements. Far less of the Route B Alternative (42 miles out of a total of 238 miles) currently supports passenger trains. In addition, air pollutants and energy use would be reduced to a greater extent with the Route A Alternative as compared to the Route B Alternative. In comparison to the Route B Alternative, the Route A Alternative would have fewer noise impacts; it also has fewer hazardous material sites in the vicinity, fewer threatened and endangered species potentially present along the route, fewer wetlands adjacent to the route, and fewer waterways crossing the route.

#### **1.5 PROCEDURAL HISTORY**

Illinois DOT and Iowa DOT, in conjunction with FRA, evaluated the scope of the Project to identify the appropriate level of NEPA analysis and concluded that an EA should be prepared. In addition, Illinois DOT and Iowa DOT opted to take the tiered approach to the NEPA process in which the Tier 1 Service Level EA would be developed for FRA approval, followed by the Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents to address specific project level impacts.

The FRA Office of Railroad Development has reviewed the attached Tier 1 Service Level EA and Supplement to the Tier 1 Service Level EA. Based on the EA and Supplement, completed in September 2009 and August 2010, respectively. FRA has concluded that the Route A Preferred Alternative, including proposed mitigation measures, will not incur significant environmental impacts. However, Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents will be required prior to Project implementation as outlined in Section 4, Next Steps, of the Supplement. The following sections summarize the potential for environmental impacts on each resource category.

##### **1.5.1 Transportation**

Implementation of the Preferred Alternative would provide a new mode of travel for potential riders and would expand existing, and develop new, regional passenger rail service to help meet future travel demands. Travelers would be diverted from automobile

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(or other personal vehicle), bus, and airplane; the majority of diversions would be from personal vehicles. In addition to diversions, the Preferred Alternative would generate induced demand (additional trips made by rail) because of the convenience and low cost of the new rail service.

#### 1.5.2 Socioeconomics

The Preferred Alternative would beneficially impact socioeconomic conditions through the creation of jobs at stations, opportunities for joint development near the stations, and increased economic activity in the communities with stations, especially in the rural counties that are dependent on limited economic and employment opportunities. In addition, the construction activities would cause a temporary boost in employment in many counties, including economically distressed LaSalle County, Illinois. Impacts from specific construction and operational activities would be evaluated in subsequent Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents.

#### 1.5.3 Environmental Justice

Minority and low-income populations along the Preferred Alternative route would not be disproportionately affected. The Preferred Alternative would provide increased mobility and employment opportunities for minority and low-income populations throughout the Project area. Impacts from specific construction and operational activities would be evaluated in subsequent Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents.

#### 1.5.4 Land Use, Zoning, and Property Acquisitions

In general, existing adjacent land uses would likely continue, and future land use patterns would not change as a result of the Preferred Alternative. The proposed Amtrak station in Moline is expected to enhance transportation-oriented development adjacent to the rail line at an existing bus station. Construction of the Wyanet Connection will require acquisition of approximately 7 acres of land, including approximately 2 acres of farmland. Some incremental loss of farmland could also occur in areas where ROW would need to be expanded for track upgrades. Impacts from specific construction and operational activities would be evaluated in subsequent Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents.

#### 1.5.5 Public Health and Safety

The Preferred Alternative would improve public health and safety by upgrading grade crossing signal equipment and by providing a safe, efficient modal choice for travel from Chicago to Iowa City, through the Quad Cities. The warning systems at the at-grade crossings will be improved, as needed, by installing gates and flashing lights at public crossings and by upgrading to constant-time warning circuitry. This will allow communities to pursue quiet zones if they so desire. Impacts from specific construction and operational activities would be evaluated in subsequent Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents.

#### 1.5.6 Noise and Vibration

Areas with high existing traffic volumes and quiet zones are expected to experience a minor incremental increase in train noise associated with the Preferred Alternative. Conversely, areas with low existing traffic volumes, slow trains, and fewer (or no) quiet zones are expected to experience a larger incremental increase in train noise associated with the Preferred Alternative. An incremental increase in train-induced ground-borne

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vibration levels is also anticipated. The incremental increases in train noise and vibration are not considered to be significant for this analysis.

In several locations, the track structure will be improved to reduce the noise impact. Improved access through the Rock Island Yard and improvements to the BNSF crossing at Colona, Illinois, will allow for an increase in train speed that will further reduce noise impacts through the communities. In effect, the Project would install the signal infrastructure for quiet zones. Municipalities predicted to experience an increase in train noise impacts can choose to initiate the process of developing quiet zones, to take advantage of the infrastructure provided by the Project. Impacts from specific construction and operational activities would be evaluated in subsequent Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents.

#### 1.5.7 Air Quality

The Preferred Alternative will result in a negligible increase in emissions. Implementation of the two round-trip TPD scenario on the Preferred Alternative route will potentially improve the air quality in the region by diverting approximately 117,000 vehicle trips from the roads and highways and 8.4 million airline passenger-miles between Chicago and Iowa City. Emissions from the Preferred Alternative will be well below the General Conformity *de minimis* threshold for all nonattainment and maintenance areas within the Project area. The air toxics effects from implementing the proposed passenger rail service will be minimal. Impacts from specific construction and operational activities would be evaluated in subsequent Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents.

#### 1.5.8 Hazardous Material

The addition of two round-trip TPD on the existing rail lines will not impact existing hazardous material sites. Specific construction activities, such as reconstruction of the rail line between Wyanet and Iowa City and construction of the Eola Mainline Improvements and Wyanet Connection, have the potential to affect or be affected by hazardous material sites; any potential impacts will be evaluated and mitigation measures will be developed in the Tier 2 Project Level NEPA analysis. Impacts from specific construction and operational activities would be evaluated in subsequent Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents.

If any contamination is encountered during construction, the proper agencies would be notified and the contaminated soil would be handled and disposed of in accordance with Illinois or Iowa regulations based on location. Detailed hazardous material/special waste studies would be conducted in a manner consistent with Illinois DOT and Iowa DOT protocols and would be documented in subsequent Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents.

#### 1.5.9 Cultural Resources

The replacement of existing rail, ties, and ballast, a common practice that is essential to operation and maintenance of any railroad, will not likely result in any adverse effects on historic properties. Alternatives for construction of the Eola Mainline Improvements, Wyanet Connection, and station facilities will be identified, and Project-related consultation among FRA, Illinois DOT, Iowa DOT, and the consulting parties will occur as part of the Tier 2 Project Level NEPA process. Impacts from specific construction and

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operational activities would be evaluated in subsequent Tier 2 Project Level NEPA documents. Avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures would also be evaluated.

#### 1.5.10 Parks and Natural Areas

Most impacts of the Preferred Alternative on parks and natural areas will be temporary during construction. Five prairie areas were identified within the Wyanet Connection section of the Project area. One of these prairie areas is of high quality. These prairie remnants and other parks and natural areas identified during the Tier 2 Project Level analysis will be avoided if possible. If impacts are unavoidable, coordination will take place with agencies having jurisdiction over these areas. Should impacts to the high quality prairie remnants be unavoidable, IDNR recommends that the impact area be excavated and moved to a suitable site. Tree replacement for the Wyanet Connection could take place in the agricultural areas within the 7 acres that will be purchased for the Project.

#### 1.5.11 Section 4(f) Properties

No Section 4(f) properties have been identified that will be used by operation of the Preferred Alternative or construction of the Eola Main Line Improvements and Wyanet Connection. As specific construction activities are identified and the Project advances during the Tier 2 Project Level NEPA process, FRA, Illinois DOT, and Iowa DOT will continue to work closely with the relevant officials having jurisdiction over Section 4(f) properties.

#### 1.5.12 Waterways

Impacts on waterways will primarily be temporary during construction of any needed bridge or culvert replacements, stations, and other facilities. Temporary impacts will cease immediately after construction is completed and will be mitigated through the implementation of management practices (BMP).

Construction of the Eola Main Line Improvements would require a portion (approximately 4,920 linear feet) of linear conveyances to be filled and relocated to a culvert or enclosed conduit. Mitigation for the potential impacts on the stormwater drainage features could be accomplished through a combination of on- and offsite restoration. Onsite mitigation could include replacement of the affected stormwater channels by enclosed conduits, which would maintain the hydraulic capacity and connectivity. Offsite mitigation could include enhancement of the up-stream Eola and Night Heron marshes and could include downstream aquatic habitat within the southern branch of Indian Creek.

IDOT and IDNR met on July 27, 2010 to discuss general concept-level mitigation. IDNR concurred with the general mitigation approach, understanding that detailed, site-specific mitigation plans would be developed during the Tier 2 Project Level EA. The Tier 2 Project Level NEPA review for the Eola Main Line Improvements would include the full range of alternatives evaluation, impact assessment, and mitigation development, including permit applications to avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts on aquatic resource features.

Construction of the Wyanet Connection would require approximately 2,050 linear feet of Pond Creek to be filled and relocated. As the railroad embankment is constructed, a new channel would be excavated north of the new embankment. Construction of the Wyanet

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Connection may also result in downstream impacts on biota and habitat. During construction, changes in the hydrological flow may cause indirect effects on downstream habitat. Mitigation for the impacts on Pond Creek could be accomplished by a combination of restoration options, including on-site replacement of the current functions of Pond Creek through development of a more natural channel, offsite enhancement of downstream habitat within the Pond Creek watershed, onsite wetland development within a newly developed riparian corridor, and purchase of stream/wetland mitigation credits from an approved mitigation bank within the service area.

IDOT and IDNR met on July 27, 2010 to discuss general concept-level mitigation. IDNR concurred with the general mitigation approach, understanding that detailed, site-specific mitigation plans would be developed during the Tier 2 Project Level EA. The Tier 2 Project Level NEPA review for the Eola Main Line Improvements would include the full range of alternatives evaluation, impact assessment, and mitigation development, including permit applications to avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts on aquatic resource features.

The Preferred Alternative will not impact waterways during operations. Permits and approvals would be needed from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, and Iowa Department of Natural Resources prior to any construction impacts on waterways. Specific construction impacts will be identified during the Tier 2 Project Level analysis.

#### 1.5.13 Wetlands

No wetland impacts were identified in the Tier 1 Service Level EA, but the Supplement identified 1.7 acres of wetland impacts from the construction of the Eola Main Line Improvements. Mitigation for the Eola Main Line Improvements could occur on site or off site. Onsite mitigation would include replacement of the affected stormwater channels where practical. Additional offsite mitigation could include enhancement of upstream Eola and Night Heron marshes. Operation of the additional two round-trip TPD will not impact wetlands. Impacts from specific construction activities, such as the Eola Main Line Improvements and Wyanet Connection, will be identified and evaluated during the Tier 2 Project Level analysis, including avoidance and minimization of impacts, identification of mitigation alternatives, and the potential need for permits and approvals.

#### 1.5.14 Water Quality

The Preferred Alternative will not result in permanent impacts on water quality but may have some temporary impacts during construction. Specific construction impacts will be evaluated during the Tier 2 Project Level analysis.

#### 1.5.15 Floodplains

The Preferred Alternative crosses several floodplains, such as the Mississippi and Des Plaines rivers. No floodplain impacts were identified in the September 2009 Tier 1 Service Level EA, but floodplain impacts resulting from the Eola Main Line Improvements and Wyanet Connection were identified in the August 2010 Supplement.

Approximately 2,300 feet of the 13,500-foot Eola Main Line Improvements would be constructed in the existing floodplain. The Eola Main Line Improvements would not affect the floodway of Indian Creek and the South Tributary of Indian Creek. Floodplain permits from Kane and Du Page counties would be required. Impacts on the stream and

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floodplain would be minimized as the design process advances and would be further assessed in a tier 2 project level EA.

Approximately 2,400 feet of the 4,000-foot Wyanet Connection would be constructed in the existing floodplain. The drainage area of Pond Creek upstream of the Project area is more than 10 square miles; in accordance with 17 Illinois Administrative Code 3700 and 3706, a joint IDNR, Illinois EPA, and USACE floodplain permit would be needed to relocate the stream and construct the Wyanet Connection. After the floodplain permit is reviewed by the state, a copy of the permit would be sent to the Bureau County Emergency Service and Disaster Administration for their review. Impacts on the stream and floodplain would be minimized as the design process advances and would be further assessed in a tier 2 project level EA.

Track improvements will be designed during the Tier 2 Project Level NEPA process to avoid permanent impacts on floodplains. Temporary floodplain disruptions may occur during construction.

#### 1.5.16 Threatened and Endangered Species

The operation of the additional two round-trip TPD along the Preferred Alternative will not affect threatened and endangered species. Additional analysis and coordination will be completed during the Tier 2 Project Level analysis for site-specific construction activities.

#### 1.5.17 Energy Use/Climate Change

The Preferred Alternative is estimated to decrease personal vehicle traffic by 16.5 million passenger-miles per year and reduce airline travel by 8.4 million passenger-miles per year. Greenhouse gas emissions are estimated to decrease by approximately 2,001 tons per year and fuel consumption to decrease by approximately 266,000 gallons per year.

#### 1.5.18 Construction Impacts

The Preferred Alternative includes construction activities for signal improvements; track and tie upgrades; construction of the Eola Mainline Improvements and Wyanet connection; and bridge and culvert repair, rehabilitation, and replacement, which will result in temporary impacts on the environment. These impacts will be minimized through the use of BMPs. As discussed in Section 3.19, Construction Impacts, of the September 2009 Service Level EA, ground disturbance may result in the removal of vegetation from some areas and BMPs would be implemented to minimize both wind and water erosion of exposed soil. Areas would be revegetated as soon as practicable to maintain long-term stability. Temporary crossing closures will affect traffic patterns while the track and ties are upgraded. Construction impacts, temporary detour routes, and specific BMPs to be employed will be examined in more detail in the Tier 2 Project Level analysis.

#### 1.5.19 Irreversible and Irretrievable Commitment of Resources

The Preferred Alternative will result in the irreversible and irretrievable commitment of construction materials such as steel, concrete, ballast rock, and wood. Though largely irretrievable, these resources are not in short supply and many of the materials could be recycled for other projects when they no longer meet the design needs for passenger rail service. In addition, energy resources and financial resources would be committed to the Project for construction, operation, and maintenance. Land for the Wyanet Connection

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will also be irretrievably and irreversibly committed for conversion to railroad ROW. The Tier 2 Project Level NEPA process will also result in the irretrievable commitment of federal and state financial resources.

#### 1.5.20 Indirect and Cumulative Impacts

The Preferred Alternative has the potential for beneficial indirect effects along the route, including reduced traffic congestion on existing roadways, reduced vehicle emissions, and increased potential for transit-oriented development of other services near the proposed stops. The Preferred Alternative will have a slight beneficial contribution to cumulative impacts by improving overall air quality, reducing roadway congestion, and increasing the potential for transit-oriented development.

### 1.6 COMMENTS AND COORDINATION

During the development of the EA, coordination letters were sent to federal and state agencies. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Region 5), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Region 7), U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service, Federal Aviation Administration, Illinois Commerce Commission, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, and Iowa Department of Natural Resources responded to the request for comments on the Project. Those comments were addressed in the EA. Comments received after the EA was published are addressed in Section 1.9, Public Comments.

### 1.7 DISTRIBUTION OF THE EA

Paper copies of the EA were distributed to 14 libraries located in Illinois and Iowa along the Route A and Route B alternatives. The mayor, city manager, or city administrator in each of these cities or villages was notified by email of the availability of the EA. It was also distributed electronically to the public and government agencies through publication on the internet at: <http://www.chicagotoiowacity.com/>. Government agencies received an email notification of publication of the EA, and the public was notified via press releases in both English and Spanish to media outlets in Illinois and Iowa; paid advertisements were placed in newspapers serving locations with potential stations.

A 21-day public review and comment period, in accordance with FRA requirements, closed on October 15, 2009. The document was accessible on the Project Website and at the 14 local libraries along the corridor. Comments were accepted at the public meeting. In addition, a toll-free phone line, an email address, a mailing address, and a Website form were available for the public to provide comments. The comments received and responses to comments are included in the August 2010 Supplement.

The August 2010 Supplement was distributed electronically to the public and government agencies through publication on the internet at: <http://www.chicagotoiowacity.com/>. Government agencies received an email notification of publication of the Supplement.

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## 1.8 CONCLUSION

Based on the above, FRA finds that the Project, as presented and assessed in the Tier 1 Service Level EA according to FRA's Procedure for Considering Environmental Impacts, including any identified mitigation measures outlined within, will not have a significant adverse impact on the quality of the human and natural environment. The Tier 1 Service Level EA did not identify any use of Section 4(f)-protected properties or impacts on wetlands or floodplains. Tier 2 Project-Level NEPA documents will be completed when specific construction activities are defined.

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Administrator

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Date