

1. ROLE OF RAIL IN STATEWIDE TRANSPORTATION





Iowa has a robust and thriving rail transportation system that has 3,801 miles of mainline track. Stretched end to end, that length is equivalent to the distance from Iowa to Ireland. This system is a critical component of Iowa's agriculture and manufacturing economies and allows Iowa businesses to send or receive shipments around the world through connections with the multimodal transportation system.

This document was developed by the Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) to serve as Iowa's State Rail Plan (SRP). The Iowa SRP provides an overview of the state's rail network, examines the ongoing development of infrastructure by railroads, and provides a pathway for the future of rail transportation in the state.

The Iowa SRP was created in compliance with the federal Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA), as amended by the Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA).

The SRP is one of several long-range plans that Iowa DOT develops. These plans, along with other components of the planning, programming, and project development process, all function within the framework established by Iowa's long-range transportation plan.

1.1 Iowa's Objectives for the Multimodal Transportation System

State Long-Range Transportation Plan (SLRTP)

Iowa DOT's 2022 statewide transportation plan, Iowa in Motion 2050, established a transportation system vision of "A safe and efficient multimodal transportation system that enables the social and economic wellbeing of all Iowans, provides enhanced access and mobility for people and freight, and accommodates the unique needs of urban and rural areas in a sustainable manner." The plan notes that the ultimate purpose of the transportation system is to get people and goods where they need to go, or more simply, mobility. The plan defines mobility through four system objectives – safety, sustainability, accessibility, and flow – and sets up a performance management framework for Iowa DOT planning and programming processes to ensure a unified approach to developing the transportation system. This is visualized in Figure 1.1.

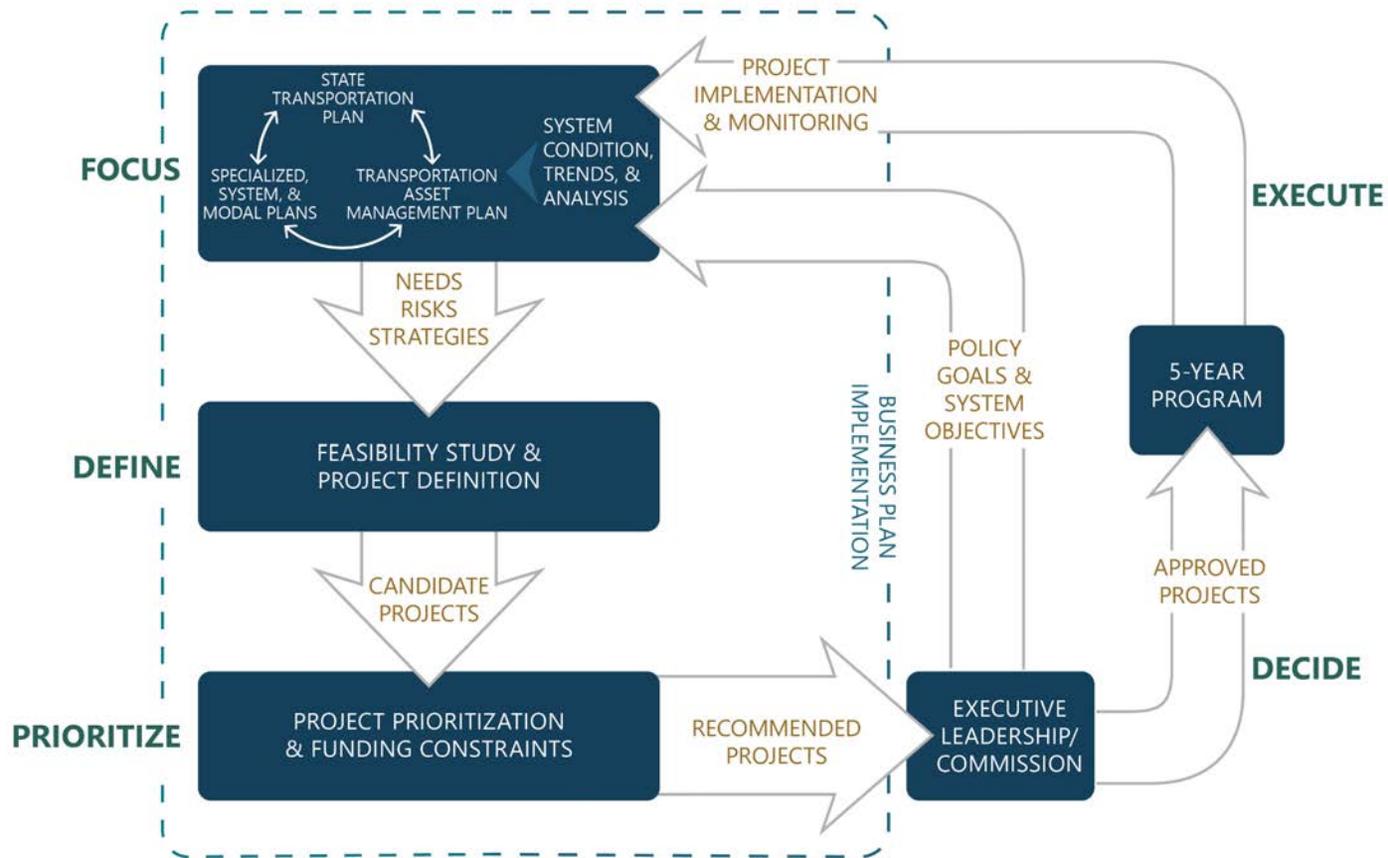
Figure 1.1: Iowa DOT system objectives



Source: Iowa in Motion 2050

In the overall planning and programming process, the SRP, along with Iowa in Motion 2050 and other system and modal plans, plays a role in helping to focus attention and priorities based on system needs, risks, and strategies. Figure 1.2 shows how these broader planning efforts help guide the planning and project development process that ultimately leads to the Five-Year Program (5YP), which identifies specific investments over the next five years. While not shown on Figure 1.2, the 5YP is incorporated into the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), which includes federal funding programmed for transportation improvements in the state.

Figure 1.2: Iowa DOT planning and programming documents and processes



Source: Iowa in Motion 2050



Related Planning Documents

State Freight Plan (SFP)

The 2022 SFP documents the immediate and long-range freight planning activities and investments in the state, including rail. IIA requires that the state's freight plan include a description of how the plan will improve the ability of the state to meet the National Multimodal Freight Policy goals in 49 U.S.C. 70101(b) and the National Highway Freight Program (NHFP) goals described in 23 U.S.C. 167. These were summarized in a single list to be addressed throughout the SFP (see Table 1.2). These goals relate strongly to the goals and objectives established for rail transportation in the state, which are discussed in Chapter 5, Rail Service and Investment Program.

- To identify and invest in infrastructure improvements, policies, and operational innovations.
- To improve the safety, security, efficiency, and resiliency of multimodal freight transportation.
- To achieve, maintain, and improve the state of good repair on the National Multimodal Freight Network (NMFN).
- To use innovation and advanced technology to improve the safety, efficiency, and reliability of the NMFN.
- To improve the economic efficiency and productivity of the NMFN.
- To improve the reliability of freight transportation.
- To improve the short – and long – distance movement of goods.
- To improve the flexibility of states to support multi-state corridor planning and the creation of multi-State organizations to increase the ability of states to address multimodal freight connectivity.
- To reduce the adverse environmental impacts of freight movement on the NMFN.
- To pursue the goals described in this subsection in a manner that is not burdensome to state and local governments.

Five-Year Program (5YP)

The 5YP is developed and approved annually by the Iowa Transportation Commission (Commission) and includes specific highway and bridge projects anticipated to be constructed over the next five years on the state highway system. The 5YP also documents the Commission's actions to award projects through various state and federal transportation formula and grant programs. This includes several rail transportation funding programs that are discussed throughout the SRP. The 5YP is approved each June for the following State Fiscal Year (July 1 – June 30). However, the Commission acts on the award of rail funds throughout the year based on each program's application cycle.

Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP)

The STIP is a federally required listing of projects for which federal-aid funding is proposed for the next four years. The STIP is adopted each October 1 for the following Federal Fiscal Year (October 1 – September 30) and incorporates projects from the 5YP as well as from Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and Regional Planning Affiliation (RPA) Transportation Improvement Programs (TIP). The STIP identifies projects funded by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), including highway-railroad grade crossing safety projects, and by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). These projects may have a potential intersection with the Iowa railroad network. Rail projects in the state have also been added to the STIP in the past for illustrative purposes to support applications for federal grant funding.

Planning Factors

IJA maintained the ten transportation planning factors that were included in the prior federal surface transportation bill, the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act. The system objectives and planning considerations discussed in Iowa in Motion 2050 are closely aligned with the ten federal planning factors. These planning factors help guide Iowa's multimodal planning process, including for rail transportation.

1. Support **economic vitality**, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency.
2. Increase the **safety** of the transportation system for motorized and nonmotorized users.
3. Increase the **security** of the transportation system for motorized and nonmotorized users.
4. Increase the **accessibility and mobility** of people and for freight.
5. Protect and enhance the **environment**, promote **energy conservation**, improve the **quality of life**, and promote **consistency** between transportation improvements and state and local planned growth and economic development patterns.
6. Enhance the integration and **connectivity** of the transportation system, across and between modes, for people and freight.
7. Promote **efficient system management and operation**.
8. Emphasize the **preservation** of the existing transportation system.
9. Improve the **resiliency and reliability** of the transportation system and reduce or mitigate stormwater impacts of surface transportation.
10. Enhance **travel and tourism**.

1.2 Rail Transportation's Role within the State's Transportation System

Iowa's rail network provides connections to national and international destinations for freight and passengers throughout the state and region. The system and services continue to evolve, driven by changes in the rail industry and demand from shippers and passengers. Iowa's 160,000-mile multimodal freight transportation system is comprised of multiple aviation facilities, a well-developed highway system, an extensive rail network, a large web of pipelines, two bordering navigable waterways, and hundreds of freight-related facilities to assist in the movement of commodities. Although rail competes with other transportation modes, it also complements them as an essential part of an optimized transportation network.

Although rail accounts for about three percent of the freight network's mileage, it carries roughly nine percent of Iowa's freight tonnage. The rail network performs an important role in moving bulk commodities produced and consumed in the state to and from local, regional, and national processors, livestock feeders, and river terminals, as well as ports for international export. The rail network's ability to haul large volumes over long distances at low costs will continue to be a major factor in moving freight and improving the economy of Iowa.

In addition to freight rail transportation, Iowa has two passenger rail routes operated by Amtrak that stop at six stations through the state and serve long-distance destinations between Chicago and California. As metropolitan areas throughout Iowa continue to grow, the need to consider a diverse network of passenger transportation options that will accommodate this growth will continue to be a factor. Passenger rail contributes significantly to economic growth and can strengthen a state's service and tourism industries.



1.3 Iowa's Vision for Rail Transportation

Iowa's rail vision statement is: "A safe and efficient rail system that provides Iowa with economic growth opportunities and competitiveness by maintaining the rail infrastructure, ensuring connectivity for people and goods in an environmentally sustainable manner." Goals and objectives were developed to support this vision. Goals are shown in Figure 1.3. Additional discussion of the vision, goals, and objectives is included in Chapter 5, Iowa's Rail Service and Investment Program, and the process for developing them is documented in Chapter 6, Coordination and Review.

Figure 1.3: Iowa's vision and goals for rail transportation



Source: Iowa DOT

1.4 Institutional Governance Structure of Iowa Rail Programs

Iowa Transportation Commission (Commission)

The Commission was created for the purpose of developing comprehensive transportation policy and planning within the state of Iowa. The Commission has final approval authority on funding allocations, including the Railroad Revolving Loan and Grant (RRLG) Program, federally funded highway-railroad grade crossing safety projects, and highway-railroad grade crossing surface repair projects.

Commission membership is comprised of seven transportation commissioners, who are appointed by the Iowa Governor and confirmed by the Iowa Senate. The Commission hosts monthly meetings, with eight held in Ames and four held in various other locations around the state annually.

Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT)

Iowa DOT does not own or operate rail facilities but is responsible for coordinating the overall state rail transportation improvement strategy. The department is primarily responsible for rail planning, crossing safety programs, and project development activities, including development of the SRP.

Iowa DOT is Iowa's State Rail Transportation Authority (SRTAA) and State Rail Plan Approval Authority (SRPAA). Furthermore, Iowa complies with the requirements of 49 U.S.C. §22102, which stipulates eligibility requirements for the long-established Federal Rail Administration (FRA) rail freight grant assistance program pertaining to state planning and administration.

Iowa DOT is the primary rail regulator within the state of Iowa. However, Iowa DOT has limited regulatory authority. Iowa DOT participates in the railroad abandonment process and offers comment on federal rail legislation and rulemaking. Iowa DOT also provides an avenue for rail-related citizen complaints that are covered in Iowa Code Chapter 327G, such as issues with fencing, private crossings, and blocked crossings. When applicable under Iowa Code 327C and Iowa Code 327D, Iowa DOT can facilitate service disputes between shippers and carriers through the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals.

Iowa DOT is also involved in efforts related to state and federal financing. This can involve loans and grants for construction and maintenance of track, safety improvements at highway-rail crossings, and developing new spur tracks to support economic development.



Modal Transportation Bureau

The Modal Transportation Bureau includes three teams – Aviation, Public Transit, and Rail Transportation. The Rail Transportation Team has the primary responsibility for rail planning at Iowa DOT. The team administers various rail-related programs, including:

- Rail policy and legislation development
- Advocacy and communications
- Railroad Revolving Loan and Grant (RRLG) Program
- Highway/railroad project agreements
- Crossing safety
- Surface repair
- Passenger and freight rail planning
- Track inspection

The Public Transit Team administers federal and state transit grants and provides technical assistance to Iowa's 19 urban public transit systems and 16 regional public transit systems. Every county in Iowa is served by public transit to ensure Iowans have transportation to work, medical facilities, meal sites, and leisure activities. This team will have a role in ensuring that any future intercity passenger rail services are coordinated with local transit.

The Aviation Team advocates for and delivers services that promote and enhance a healthy air transportation system. Activities include administering state and federal aviation funding programs; managing the Iowa aircraft registration program; inspecting and certifying all public use airports; statewide aviation weather reporting; communications, outreach, and educational activities; aviation system planning, data collection, and analysis; and pavement inspections at federally funded airports.

Systems Planning Bureau

A primary function of the Systems Planning Bureau is to prepare comprehensive, intermodal, and modal transportation system plans for the state. These plans are used to direct transportation investments. The bureau also maintains data and mapping related to railroads in the state.

District Transportation Planners

There are six Iowa DOT districts statewide. Each district has a District Transportation Planner who is involved in multimodal transportation planning. These planners also regularly engage with MPOs and RPAs on local transportation planning, including freight and passenger rail considerations.

Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA)

IEDA's mission is to strengthen economic and community vitality by building partnerships and leveraging resources to make Iowa the choice for people and business. Through its two main divisions – business development and community development – IEDA administers several state and federal programs to meet its goals of assisting individuals, communities, and businesses.

IEDA also provides financial assistance programs to aid in the attraction of new industries along the state's rail lines through initiatives including tax credits and, in some instances, financial assistance for projects such as track rehabilitation and the construction of spur tracks to industries.

1.5 Authority to Conduct Rail Planning and Investment

State Authority for Rail Planning

Iowa Code Title VIII (Transportation) Chapter 307 assigns powers to Iowa DOT to plan and implement transportation system improvements. Iowa DOT's rail-related responsibilities are detailed in Iowa Code §307.26. These include the following:

1. Conducting research on basic railroad problems and identification of present capability of railroads to provide acceptable levels of service.
2. Development of rail transportation systems for expansion of passenger or freight services.
3. Development of programs in anticipation of railroad abandonment.
4. Development and maintenance of a federal-state relationship of programs relating to railroad safety enforcement, track standards, rail equipment, operating rules, and transportation of hazardous materials.
5. Conducting research on railroad-highway grade crossings and development of a safety program in order to reduce injuries or fatalities.
6. Applying for, accepting, and expending federal, state, or private funds for the improvement of rail transportation.
7. Studies for coordination of railway service with that of other transportation modes.
8. Studies of regulatory changes deemed necessary to effectuate economical and efficient railroad service.
9. Provision of advice and assistance regarding agreements with railroads for the restoration, conservation, or improvements of railroads.
10. Administration of various responsibilities including: supervision and regulation of rail carriers, railway corporations – powers, construction, and operations of railways, railroad rights-of-way, crossings, tracks and fencing, and railway assistance, per Title VIII §327C through H.
11. Performing other duties and responsibilities as may be assigned by the Iowa DOT Director and the Iowa Transportation Commission.
12. Advising and assisting in the establishment and development of railroad districts upon request.
13. Conducting innovative experimental programs relating to rail transportation problems within the state.
14. Performance of the role of “applicant” pursuant to the Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act of 1976.
15. Identification of those segments of railroad trackage, which, if improved, may provide increased transportation services for Iowans.



State Authority for Grant, Loan, and Other Rail Financing

Iowa has utilized both federal and state transportation funding programs for rail infrastructure improvements where eligible and appropriate. State-sponsored rail investment in Iowa has been provided through Iowa DOT and other state economic development agencies.

Title VIII Chapter 327H of the Iowa Code allows Iowa DOT to administer a Railroad Revolving Loan and Grant (RRLG) Program for the following purposes:

- To provide assistance for the restoration, conservation, improvement, and construction of railroad main lines, branch lines, switching yards, sidings, rail connections, intermodal yards, highway grade separations, and other rail-related improvements.
- For rail economic development projects that improve rail facilities, including the construction of branch lines, sidings, rail connections, intermodal yards, and other rail-related improvements that spur economic development and job growth.

Title VIII Chapter 327J of the Iowa Code created a Passenger Rail Service Revolving Fund that could be used to pay the costs associated with the initiation, operation, and maintenance of passenger rail service.

Other state-sponsored rail investment programs include:

- Highway-Railroad Grade Crossing Safety Program – This federally funded program provides financial assistance to states for safety improvements at highway-railroad crossings.
- Grade Crossing Safety Program – This state-funded program assists railroads with funding to defray a portion of the signal maintenance costs at signals installed under the Highway-Railroad Grade Crossing Safety Program since 1973.
- Highway-Railroad Grade Crossing Surface Repair Program – This state-funded program is designed to assist city and county highway authorities and railroads with surface improvements at highway-railroad crossings.
- Primary Road Highway-Railroad Grade Crossing Repair Program – This state-funded program is designed to assist with surface improvements at highway-railroad crossings on the Primary Road System.

Additional details on these rail and rail safety related funding programs appear in Chapter 3, Freight Inventory and Performance and Chapter 5, Iowa's Rail Service and Investment Program.

1.6 SRP Organization

The SRP is organized as follows.



1. The Role of Rail in Statewide Transportation

This chapter highlights the state's objectives for the transportation system, rail's role within the system and the vision for rail transportation within the state, the institutional governance structure of state rail programs, and the state's authority for rail financing.



2. Passenger Rail Inventory and Performance

This chapter provides an overview of passenger rail in Iowa, including a description and inventory of current service, performance information, and proposed improvements and investments.



3. Freight Rail Inventory and Performance

This chapter provides an overview of freight rail in Iowa, including a description and inventory of current service, performance information, and proposed improvements and investments.



4. Rail Planning Considerations

This chapter highlights trends, their impacts, and rail service needs and opportunities.



5. Rail Service and Investment Program

This chapter provides the vision, goals, and objectives for rail transportation in Iowa. It highlights program coordination, rail agencies, program effects, passenger and freight components, rail studies and reports, and outlines the passenger and freight rail capital program.



6. Coordination and Review

This chapter discusses public and agency participation in plan development, coordination with neighboring states, stakeholder involvement and feedback, and coordination with other planning programs.



7. Appendices

The appendices include passenger stations, freight railroad profiles, freight facilities, freight railroad improvements and investments, vehicle miles traveled calculations, commodity flows, and economic impact of railroads.

The SRP will guide Iowa DOT in its activities of promoting access to rail transportation, helping to improve the freight railroad transportation system, expanding passenger rail service, and promoting improved safety on the rail system and where the rail system interacts with people and other transportation modes. The SRP is an important component of multimodal transportation planning to ensure Iowa's future transportation system meets the needs of both passengers and freight and helps Iowa maintain a strong economy and high quality of life.



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