

6. COORDINATION AND REVIEW





This chapter describes how Iowa DOT involved stakeholders in the coordination necessary to develop the Iowa State Rail Plan (SRP). Stakeholders included shippers; modal operators; transportation academics; logistics organizations and service providers; current and potential passenger rail users' industrial and manufacturing sectors; state, regional, county, and city government agencies; economic development and business interests; and the general public.

6.1 Public and Agency Participation

State

The Rail Team in the Iowa DOT Modal Transportation Bureau is primarily responsible for rail planning and policy at Iowa DOT and manages various federal and state rail programs. The Systems Planning Bureau creates comprehensive system and modal transportation plans for the state and maintains rail data and map products. These two Bureaus were the primary developers of the Plan.

However, rail planning also involves other bureaus within the Iowa DOT as well as other state agencies. The following partners provided support for the development of the Plan and were given the opportunity to provide input on the Draft Plan before it was finalized: the Iowa Transportation Commission; the Iowa DOT (District Offices, Modal Transportation Bureau, and Systems Planning Bureau); and the Iowa Economic Development Authority.

Local

Iowa DOT regularly collaborates with Iowa's nine metropolitan planning organizations (MPO) and 18 regional planning affiliations (RPA) on different transportation planning efforts. In spring 2024, Iowa DOT conducted an online survey that targeted public sector stakeholders, including MPOs, RPAs, city officials, and county representatives. Distributed through the Local Systems Bureau in coordination with MPOs and RPAs, the survey remained open from April 1 to June 19, 2024. Respondents were asked to identify their professional role, then identify locations on a map and highlight specific rail-related concerns. Multiple submissions were permitted.

These partners were also given the opportunity to provide input on the Draft Plan, ensuring their perspectives were considered.

Public

A public input period was open during February and March 2025. An online portal on the Iowa DOT webpage was provided for stakeholders and the general public to review the Draft Plan and provide any comments to be considered.

6.2 Coordination with Neighboring States

Iowa DOT understands how crucial it is to coordinate with neighboring states on rail services and corridor management. This means not only building direct partnerships, but also reviewing state and regional rail plans developed together with these states. To encourage this collaboration, Iowa DOT shared the Draft Plan with neighboring states for their feedback and has already started discussions about rail corridor proposals for the Corridor Identification and Development (Corridor ID) program.

6.3 Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholder engagement activities are crucial for Iowa DOT to understand current rail and freight movements across the state and identify key issues. Outreach efforts included delivering presentations to targeted stakeholder groups, holding committee meetings, conducting focused interviews with specific stakeholders, and managing online surveys. This section outlines each of these elements, and section 6.4 lists the input that was identified. Findings from these engagement exercises were incorporated into each chapter of this Plan.

Rail Advisory Committee (RAC)

The RAC helps guide Iowa DOT in creating a safe and efficient rail transportation system by providing advice on policies, programs, and investments. The committee consists of representatives from all operating railroads in Iowa and meets at least twice per year to discuss challenges, emerging trends, and legislative issues affecting rail transportation.

Presentations were delivered at the December 14, 2023, March 7, 2024, and October 28, 2024 RAC meetings, to outline the work to be undertaken in developing the Plan and to solicit feedback from stakeholders regarding the vision, goals, and rail service needs within the state. Interactive polling and mapping exercises were also utilized to gather input from railroad representatives.

Input from the RAC was utilized in Chapter 3, Freight Inventory and Performance; Chapter 4, Planning Considerations; and Chapter 5, Rail Service and Investment Program.

Passenger Rail Advisory Committee (PRAC)

The PRAC has been meeting regularly since 2008 to discuss passenger rail planning in the state. Members include Iowa DOT, cities, MPOs/RPAs, Amtrak, freight railroads, and passenger rail advocacy organizations. During the PRAC meeting on April 22, 2024, in Des Moines, Iowa, the rail team shared information about the development of the Plan and feedback was gathered from stakeholders on passenger rail service needs. An interactive polling exercise was utilized to facilitate this engagement.

Input from the PRAC was utilized in Chapter 2, Passenger Inventory and Performance; Chapter 4 Planning Considerations; and Chapter 5, Rail Service and Investment Program.



Freight Advisory Council (FAC)

The FAC is a group of Iowa-based public and private stakeholders serving as an advisory body to Iowa DOT on freight mobility policies, programs, and investments. This group was created in 2012 as a forum to assist with understanding the complexities associated with freight movements through education, discussion, and review. Members include representatives of the agriculture, energy, distribution, logistics, and multimodal transportation industries, as well as state and local government agencies.

Presentations outlined the development process for the Plan at FAC meetings on December 15, 2023 and March 8, 2024. The objective was to engage freight stakeholders in providing feedback on the Plan and addressing rail service needs within the state. To facilitate this engagement, planners utilized interactive polling and mapping exercises to gather insights. At the June 14, 2024 FAC meeting, a draft statement about the vision, goals, and objectives of the Plan was provided to gather their input and thoughts.

Input from the FAC was utilized in Chapter 3, Freight Inventory and Performance; Chapter 4, Planning Considerations; and Chapter 5, Rail Service and Investment Program.

Railroads

Online Survey

An online survey was conducted from January 31 – February 29, 2024 to gather direct feedback from railroad companies operating in Iowa on railroad investments, infrastructure, and operations in Iowa. Stakeholders were notified about the survey via email to encourage widespread participation.

Winter Meetings

Every winter, Iowa DOT's Rail Team hosts meetings with each railroad operating in the state. Iowa DOT began having these regular Winter Meetings with railroads following the initiation of the Primary Surface Repair Program. These annual meetings are held after the construction season and have led to significant progress through collaboration with railroads, resulting in longer-lasting rebuilt crossings. Participants typically include roadmasters, their supervisors, signal maintenance staff, and the Public Works representative managing agreements.

Input from railroads on capital improvements, weight restrictions, vertical clearances, and other relevant issues was collected during the 2024 meetings, which were held on the following dates.

- January 31, 2024 – CPKC /DME
- February 7, 2024 – BNSF
- February 14, 2024 – UP
- February 21, 2024 – Shortlines
- February 29, 2024 – CN

Railroad Interviews

The last engagement initiative with railroads involved one-on-one calls with select railroads operating in Iowa, providing an additional platform for stakeholders to share their feedback on current issues and infrastructure conditions within the state's rail network and freight system. These conversations aimed to fill in any remaining gaps by gathering valuable insights and fostering continued collaboration, ensuring that stakeholder perspectives are utilized for addressing existing challenges and enhancing rail infrastructure. Calls were held on the following dates.

- June 18, 2024 - UP
- June 19, 2024 - BNSF
- June 19, 2024 – CN
- July 15, 2024 - CIC

6.4 Stakeholder Feedback

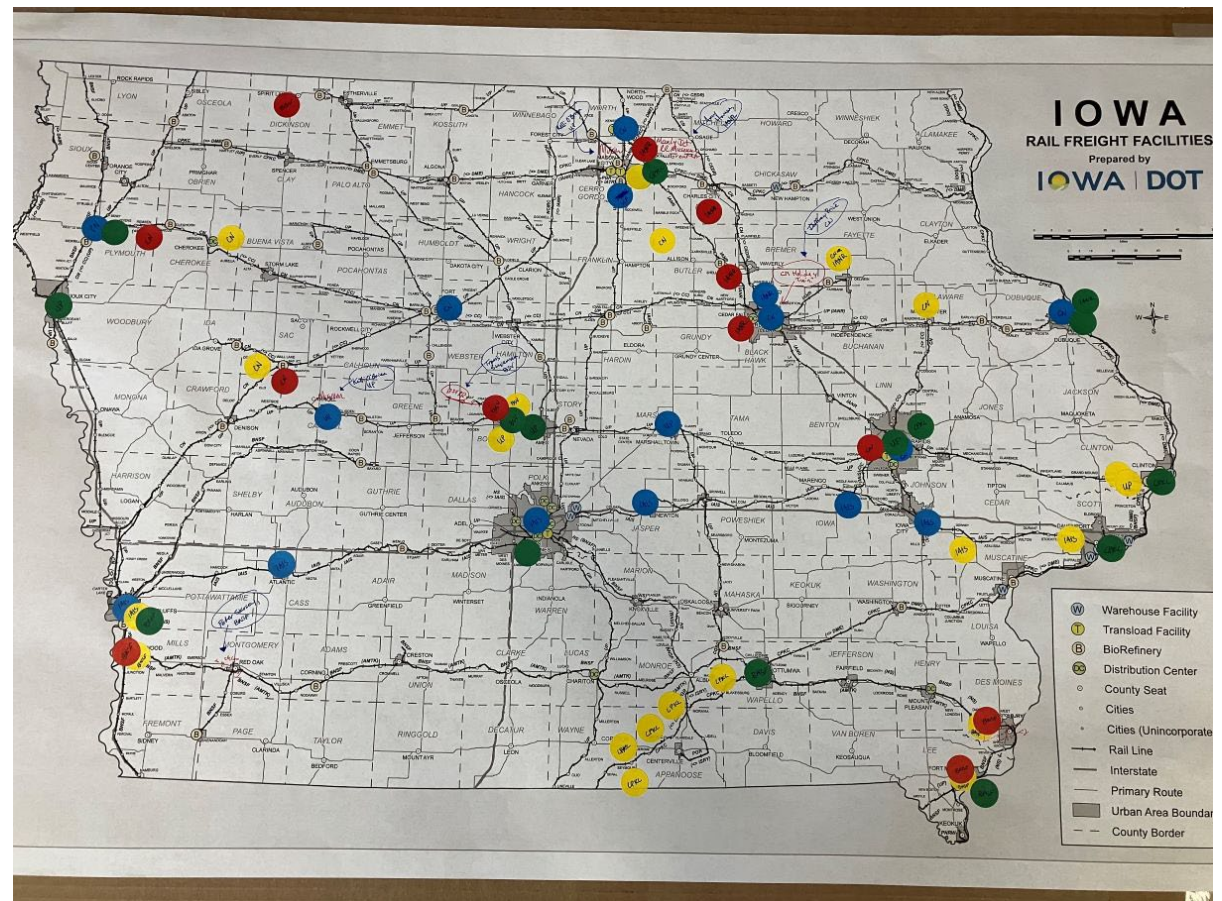
Summaries of public, agency, and stakeholder engagement efforts are outlined in sections 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3. Stakeholders provided input through mapping exercises, interactive polling exercises, surveys, and interviews. Summaries of resulting input are included in this section.

RAC and FAC Mapping Exercise

This exercise was conducted at the RAC and FAC meetings held in March 2024 to identify areas of the state with railroad issues and/or opportunities. Members were asked to place dots on a poster-sized state map to indicate their responses to the following questions. Output is shown in Figure 6.1.

1. What does good rail service look like to you? Where in the state do you see good rail service?
2. Where in the state do you see new opportunities for rail service?
3. Where in the state are there hurdles to rail service?
4. Where in the state are there opportunities for new rail/freight facilities?
5. Put a dot where your railroad has existing tourism trains or activities.
6. Put a dot where you think there are opportunities for rail tourism (including use of the rails or museum investments).

Figure 6.1: Results from RAC and FAC mapping exercise



Source: Iowa DOT

Survey of Local Officials

The following issues and concerns were noted by local officials via their survey responses.

Safety Concerns

- Unsafe, rough, and deteriorating crossings create hazards.
- Blocked crossings from idle trains have increased safety issues and limited access.
- Long train blockages hinder access to emergency services and community connectivity.
- The railroad intersects a school crossing, highlighting safety risks for students.
- Gated crossings are needed for safety, as are improved pedestrian and ADA crossings.
- Concerns about hazardous materials being transported by longer trains without clear communication.

Traffic and Accessibility Issues

- Frequent extended crossing blockages disrupt traffic flow and emergency response.
- Multiple at-grade crossings impact traffic, with potential for grade separation or alternate alignment.
- A city seeking to reopen an abandoned crossing.
- Long trains delay traffic, especially during peak hours, affecting school and work commutes.
- A road was recently closed for an extended time due to rail operations, causing significant backups.

Infrastructure and Maintenance Needs

- A transload station is needed.
- Rail crossing maintenance is lacking.
- The railroad right-of-way is poorly maintained.

Communication and Collaboration Challenges

- Difficulty in obtaining responses from the railroad about deteriorating crossings and needed improvements.
- The railroad requires agreements for “engineering services,” complicating upgrade discussions.
- Communication with railroad personnel has been challenging, impacting project timelines.

Proposed Improvements

- Seeking funding to upgrade crossings with safety measures, including lights and signals.
- Advocating for expanded rail connections and improved passenger service between key cities.
- An unpaved trail crossing requires urgent construction for accessibility.

Community Impact and Environmental Concerns

- Noise pollution from idling trains affects nearby areas, complicating the passenger experience.
- Long trains blocking access to certain facilities or outdoor spaces.
- Snow buildup at crossings increases maintenance and safety concerns during winter.
- Railyard is in a disadvantaged community.



Survey of Railroads

When surveying railroads, the following issues, gaps in services, and needs arose.

Rail Safety and Education

- Rail safety education needs to be reintegrated into Iowa drivers' education.
- Promote unified outreach on rail safety and its environmental benefits over truck transport.
- Distracted driving has caused collisions with trains and motorists.
- The lack of perceived enforcement for traffic violations impacts rail and roadway safety.
- Trespassing on rail right-of-way.

Environmental Considerations

- Transition to cleaner locomotives using renewable diesel, hydrogen, and other clean fuel sources.

Infrastructure and Funding

- Additional assistance for local road authorities is needed to support grant applications for FRA funding.
- Need to increase Section 130 funding.
- Create a rail crossing elimination program in Iowa.
- Grade separations and consolidation of crossings.
- Longer trains require more funding for infrastructure improvements.
- Increased focus and funding for intermodal facilities.
- Proposed train stations on town outskirts raise accessibility concerns for riders.

Political Factors

- Lack of political support for passenger rail.

Planning and Development

- Context sensitive roadway planning should be prioritized near railroad corridors.
- Encourage planning agencies to consider rail impacts in residential and industrial land use plans and decisions.
- Plan with the perspective of rail as an economic development driver.
- Incentivize design considerations for new developments, emphasizing diagnostics before land use changes.
- Iowa DOT could consider utilizing some Interstate rights-of-way for passenger rail, as there is often enough space for both two lanes and railroad tracks.
- Develop technology, such as a smartphone app, to help motorists avoid occupied crossings by showing train locations.

Survey of Public

Passenger Rail

Primary areas of feedback included topics of passenger rail development, expansion of services, connections to public transit, and Iowa's membership into the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC).

Freight Rail

Additional comments relating to freight rail operations included the movement of hazardous materials and rail yards away from densely populated areas, desire to increase quiet zones, and reduction of train horn volume, blocked crossings, and train speeds.