

Amtrak thinks it can lure Ohioans out of their cars and onto trains: Here's how

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Every day, tens of thousands of Ohioans ease their autos into traffic on I-71, traveling some portion of the interstate between Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati.

Amtrak believes a small percentage of them would rather ride the train.

The passenger rail service last month outlined a plan for a major expansion throughout the U.S., featuring several new routes in Ohio, including service linking Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton and Cincinnati.

It's an idea that's been discussed for years — the route was well into the planning stages in 2010 when newly elected Gov. John Kasich famously returned \$400 million to the federal government in startup costs for the 3C corridor.

Fast forward 11 years, and rail advocates are hopeful, once again, that the idea may become reality. President Joe Biden has included \$80 billion in railroad investments in his \$2 trillion infrastructure plan. And although it's not exactly clear how that \$80 billion would be spent, Amtrak simultaneously released a 15-year plan for growth that includes dozens of new routes and the potential to serve millions of new passengers.

Read more: [Rail advocacy group wants Cleveland Amtrak station back at Tower City](#)

[Major Amtrak expansion in Cleveland and Ohio included in Biden infrastructure plan](#)

In addition to what's now being called the 3C&D plan, Amtrak is also proposing new service from Cleveland to Detroit, plus more frequent trains along existing routes, connecting Cleveland to Pittsburgh, Buffalo and Chicago.

Amtrak estimates that Ohio could see as many as 1 million passengers annually, up from 132,000 in 2019.

Among the potential new travelers:

* Luis Vazquez of Cleveland, who wishes there was train service to Columbus back when he worked for Cuyahoga County and made many day trips to the state capital. "On the train, you can take out your laptop, get your work done," he said. "I couldn't do anything because I was driving." In the future, he said, he looks forward to taking the train to visit his son in Detroit.

* Chris Schmitt of Cleveland, who works remotely for an organization with offices in Chicago and Washington, D.C. Schmitt, who has traveled extensively in Europe via rail, said he'd love reliable train service to both cities. "The huge benefits of train travel were the very comfortable cabins, the free wifi, and the ability to actually get work done versus the impossibly small space on commuter jets," he said.

* Stu Nicholson, the executive director of [All Aboard Ohio](#), a passenger-rail advocacy group, who looks forward to taking the train from his home in Columbus to Cleveland when the Yankees come to town. "Under decent conditions, I don't mind driving," he said. "But I've sat in a dead stop on I-71 because of a car wreck up ahead. I've driven it in horribly bad weather. If I don't need to drive, I'm not going to drive."

Add to them: Thousands of students at Ohio State University, Cleveland State and the University of Cincinnati, people who can't drive, people who prefer not to drive, environmentalists, leisure travelers, business travelers and more.

Rail service increasing in the U.S.

With 32.5 million passengers, Amtrak experienced record ridership in 2019, the year before the pandemic brought an abrupt end to most travel.

Communities in the Northeast are the biggest users of Amtrak, but plenty of Midwesterners like train travel too. Illinois had 4.7 million Amtrak riders in 2019, Wisconsin had 971,000, Michigan had 843,529 and Missouri had 692,000.

Ohio, meanwhile, had 132,095 passengers get on or off the train in 2019, down from 159,000 in 2013.

Michigan, with a population that's 15% less than Ohio's, has more than five times as many Amtrak passengers.

The three Amtrak routes in Michigan – the Wolverine (Chicago to Detroit), Pere Marquette (Chicago to Grand Rapids) and Blue Water (Chicago to Port Huron) – are all state-supported routes; in other words, the state pays a portion of the upkeep and operational expenses.

The new routes that Amtrak is proposing in Ohio and elsewhere would not require any state buy-in, not for infrastructure improvements nor operating support, at least for the first several years.

Joseph Schwieterman, a professor at DePaul University's School of Public Service, said the Cleveland-Columbus-Dayton-Cincinnati corridor is ripe for train service, with four densely populated metro areas relatively close together.

At about 250 miles, the distance between Cleveland and Cincinnati is the "sweet spot" for train service, according to Schwieterman. "I can't think of another area quite like it."

Still, he said, it may take time to build support for train travel in the state because there is so little of it. Travelers will have to get used to going downtown to catch the train. And public transportation options in the cities might have to improve to better accommodate visitors who arrive without a car.

"It's hard to build a culture that will allow train service to flourish, which can take years," he said.

The effort might be worth it, however, particularly for places that are working to boost their populations.

"Younger people don't want to drive cars," said Laura Kliewer, director of the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission, which supports the development of rail service throughout the Midwest. "They want alternate modes of transportation."

Indeed, the busiest station in Michigan, by far, is Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan.

What matters most: frequency and reliability

Nicholson said would-be train travelers are pretty clear about what's important to them. "It's on time performance and frequency," he said. "That's when you get ridership."

Chronic lateness is a serious problem for Amtrak. The Lake Shore Limited, which connects Chicago and New York City and travels through Cleveland, had an on-time performance of 48% in 2019; the Capitol Limited, which also travels through Cleveland, was on-time just 31% of the time.

Delays are most commonly caused by freight trains – which are required by law to give preference to Amtrak on their tracks, but frequently do not. The Chicago area is a notorious chokehold.

The state of Michigan and Amtrak have spent years acquiring and improving track along the Wolverine route, which links Detroit and Chicago, to speed up the train, which now travels at 110 mph along much of the route. Even so, it's still late a majority of the time because of conflicts with freight trains.

Chronic lateness was one of the reasons Indiana recently decided to defund the Hoosier State, Amtrak service between Indianapolis and Chicago, according to Kliewer.

In 2010, opponents of the Cleveland-Columbus-Cincinnati corridor criticized the plan because of what was projected to be its slow speed, at least initially. Early projections estimated the trip from Cleveland to Cincinnati could take as long as 6½ hours – at least two hours longer than driving.

Marc Magliari, a spokesman with Amtrak, said any investment in Ohio would include track upgrades that would make train travel competitive with driving. “It doesn't have to be exactly the same speed as driving because people can be productive, or choose not to, on the train,” he said. “But it has to be competitive.”

A hypothetical schedule created by All Aboard Ohio shows three daily departures from Cleveland along the 3C route – at 6:25 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 5:25 p.m. The trip to Columbus would take two hours; the trip to Cincinnati, four and a half.

Ken Prendergast, public affairs director for All Aboard Ohio, said with the right track improvements, “4.5 hours is not only realistic, it's probably conservative.”

That schedule also includes something that's been missing from passenger rail travel in Ohio: daylight trains. Currently, the four trains that travel through Cleveland – two headed west to Chicago and two headed east to New York, Boston and Washington, D.C. – pass through Ohio between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m.

“No one wants to get on or off the train in the middle of the night,” said Kliewer.

The potential Amtrak schedule includes as many as 22 trains passing through Cleveland at all hours of the day and night.

Will it happen? Congressional leaders have promised a vote on Biden's infrastructure package sometime this summer. And then the real work will begin – discussions with state and local leaders about what routes are most logical and most likely to be supported by the traveling public.

In the meantime, the Ohio Department of Transportation this month announced \$2 billion in road construction projects for 2021. On the list: the continued widening of I-71 to three lanes between Columbus and Cincinnati.

Amtrak ridership in 10 most populous states

State	Riders per 1,000 population
California	148
Texas	7
Florida	22
New York	322
Illinois	186
Pennsylvania	258
Ohio	6
Georgia	7
North Carolina	47
Michigan	42

Amtrak ridership by city

City	Passengers per 1,000 population
Columbus	0
Cincinnati	4
Cleveland	27
Nashville	0
Las Vegas	0
Phoenix	2
Houston	3
Philadelphia	936

City	Passengers per 1,000 population
Sacramento	646
New York City	551
Milwaukee	493
Chicago	367
St. Louis	180
Buffalo	125

Source: Amtrak; note: figures are from 2015