



TACIR INSIGHT

TENNESSEE ADVISORY COMMISSION ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

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BACK ON TRACK? INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL OPTIONS FOR TENNESSEE

Background

Tennesseans traveling around the state face challenges with a transportation network that is becoming strained by congestion, and in the coming years, those challenges are expected to intensify further as both population and travel demand continue to grow. The state has already taken some steps in an effort to meet these rising transportation needs, such as through the Transportation Modernization Act of 2023. In the interest of exploring additional alternatives, Public Chapter 1114 and Public Chapter 1124, Acts of 2022, together directed TACIR to study and make recommendations regarding the potential for passenger rail service or other suitable alternatives for linking the major cities in each of the grand divisions of the state and beyond.

Findings and Recommendations

In recent years, other states have successfully initiated new intercity passenger rail services and based on their experiences and analysis conducted by regional rail commissions, TACIR finds intercity passenger rail service could help increase connectivity and facilitate tourism and other economic development initiatives in Tennessee. The state would almost certainly have to subsidize any new passenger rail service through capital investment and ongoing operating cost support, but the cost to taxpayers of establishing and operating service on any given rail corridor cannot be known without more detailed engineering and technical analysis. **TACIR recommends the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) determine the cost, engineering, and any other requirements needed to implement passenger rail service on the following corridors, in order of priority according to the following tiers, with Tier 1 being the highest: Nashville to Chattanooga to Atlanta, GA (Tier 1); Memphis to Nashville (Tier 2); Chattanooga to Knoxville to Bristol (Tier 2); Memphis to Chicago via Carbondale, IL (Tier 3); and Nashville to Louisville, KY (Tier 3).** Federal funding is available for these types of studies through the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) Corridor ID program, and **TACIR recommends TDOT submit the required data and documentation to the FRA in support of the joint application to the program already made by local governments for the Nashville to Chattanooga to Atlanta and Memphis to Nashville routes. Additionally, TACIR recommends TDOT submit an application for the Chattanooga to Knoxville to Bristol route and consider submitting applications for the two tier 3 routes at the next funding opportunity. Further, TACIR recommends the state create an office of rail and public transportation within TDOT, collaborate with Virginia to identify opportunities to maximize the viability of rail corridors that might connect with that state and the wider Amtrak network, and evaluate intercity bus service options along certain key routes in coordination with the goals of the Transportation Modernization Act.**