

Money train PA rail report a blueprint for \$7 billion in future spending

By Roger DuPuis
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A state study to be finalized late this year calls for \$7 billion in rail-related investment across Pennsylvania through 2040. Among the potential projects listed in the study is the Lemoyne Connection, which would link the Enola rail yard with freight tracks in Lemoyne. - (Photo / Amy Spangler)

Historically, Pennsylvania has been tops when it came to trains, and the midstate is a critical hub of the state's rail network, particularly its freight lines.

Roughly 10 percent of the nation's GDP moves through Cumberland, Dauphin and Perry counties every year, Tri-County Regional Planning Commission Communications Coordinator Craig Layne said. "Rail freight is a vital part of that."

But it's not cheap. Keeping the network in good repair and primed for expansion is expected to cost at least \$7 billion over the next 25 years, according to a soon-to-be-completed update to the Pennsylvania State Rail Plan.

That's why stakeholders such as TCRPC have their eyes on the document, which will serve as a blueprint for how to maintain and expand rail infrastructure across the commonwealth.

The update to the rail plan is due to be finalized by the Federal Railroad Administration by the end of this year or early next year, Pennsylvania Department of Transportation Deputy Press Secretary Erin Waters-Trasatt said.

In addition to freight, the plan focuses on passenger operations, including options for expanding services in the midstate.

"It's a comprehensive document, and we think it paints an accurate portrait of the current status of the commonwealth's rail system," said Layne, whose agency is responsible for the ongoing local Harrisburg Area Transportation Study, or HATS.

"The information on rail freight in the state rail plan will also help inform our HATS freight plan, which we will begin developing in 2016," he said.

Planning with purpose

Pennsylvania ranks first nationwide in the overall number of operating railroads and fifth in track, the report points out, with 5,000 route miles served by more than 55 companies.

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The draft update, undertaken by PennDOT in conjunction with the public and various stakeholder groups — including industry and government organizations — “serves as a guide for the planning and development of rail projects for the next five years here in the department,” Waters-Trasatt said.

“It also makes the commonwealth eligible for FRA grants/funding as they release/advertise programs over the next five years,” she added.

The document can be viewed online at <http://www.planthekeystone.com/staterailplan.html>.

The final report will include minor updates and revisions based on comments and feedback received during the comment period, Waters-Trasatt said, but “not substantial changes.”

Key factors

According to the report, more than 209 million tons of freight were hauled over Pennsylvania's rails in 2013, and that number is expected to jump 38 percent by 2040.

Higher demand for capacity due to crude oil transport from the Midwest and natural-gas shipments from Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale region will require investments in additional track and yard capacity, the study says.

But that burgeoning demand is expected to come up against physical and safety constraints, the report cautions:

- Investment is needed to catch up on deferred maintenance of track, bridges, stations and signal systems, which has reduced speeds and caused delays.
- Height and weight restrictions mean heavier rail cars cannot be accommodated on some parts of the system. That has meant limiting use of double-stacked containers on freight cars, a technique that would help boost capacity.
- As demand increases for passenger and freight rail services, conflicts between the two types of service could lead to delays for both shippers and travelers.
- Grade crossings continue to pose hazards for collisions between trains and motor vehicles.
- An increase in crude oil shipments increases the risk for possible derailments involving hazardous materials.

The report predicts \$463 million must be spent on freight projects to address such issues over the next four years, followed by \$1.5 billion between 2020 and 2040.

Sources for that funding — as well as for passenger projects — are expected to include local, state and federal governments as well as private-sector investment, the report states.

Among freight improvements listed under the draft plan is \$20 million for the Lemoyne Connection, under which Norfolk Southern Corp. has long planned to ease congestion in its Harrisburg yard by connecting the Enola rail yard on the West Shore with freight trackage in Lemoyne.

There is no specific timetable on the project, Layne noted, adding that its future could be affected by other plans for turning the former Cumberland Valley Railroad Bridge into a span for pedestrians and bicyclists, with the possibility of its being used for transit access in the future.

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As well, the state report calls for \$30 million to replace an underpass at the entrance to Norfolk Southern's Rutherford Yard.

Passenger projects

On the passenger side, the report predicts nearly \$3.5 billion will need to be spent over the next four years, followed by \$1.9 billion between 2020 and 2040.

The report notes that Amtrak is in the midst of a \$151 billion improvement program focused on its own maintenance and expansion projects, and that its Keystone service between Harrisburg and Philadelphia "is also the target of substantial investments to increase service efficiency and capacity."

According to Amtrak spokesman Craig Schulz, the Keystone service accounted for 1.36 million trips in the fiscal year ended Sept. 30, a 2.5 percent increase over the previous year.

Layne pointed out a major new Dauphin County project included in Keystone Corridor upgrades.

"We are pleased to see the new Middletown Amtrak Station listed in the plan," Layne said, adding that construction on that facility is expected to begin next year.

Looking forward, Layne said TCRPC also is pleased to see another capital-area passenger project mentioned in the state report: The long-discussed Harrisburg Commuter Rail System, formerly dubbed CorridorOne.

"It is our hope that this discussion will continue, and its inclusion in the state rail plan certainly gives credence to the importance of further thought on this proposed commuter rail system," Layne said.

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