MID-OHIO REGIONAL
MORPC
PLANNING COMMISSION

HEARTLAND RAIL CONNECTIVITY INITIATIVE

FEDERAL STATE PARTNERSHIP FOR INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL

Applicant: *Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (Lead) in partnership with the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority*

Location: *Central Ohio Counties - Delaware, Fairfield, Fayette, Franklin, Hocking, Knox, Licking, Logan, Madison, Marion, Morrow, Perry, Pickaway, Ross, Union*

FSP Budget Amount: *$4.8 million*
Local Match: *$1.2 million*
Total: *$6 million*

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1. COVER PAGE

Project Title	Heartland Rail Connectivity Initiative
Lead Applicant Name	Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC)
Joint Applicant Name(s)	N/A
Amount of FSP Program funding requested under this NOFO	$4,800,000
Amount of proposed non-Federal share	$1,200,000
Source(s) of proposed non-Federal share	Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority (Convention Center Authority)
Amount of other Federal funding, if applicable	N/A
Source(s) of other Federal funding, if applicable	N/A
Total Project Cost	$6,000,000
Capital Cost Estimate	N/A
All costs and the value of any resources needed to complete the Project Development, Final Design, and Construction stages of a capital project.	N/A
Total cost by Lifecycle Stage(s) for which funding is requested under this NOFO (list each Lifecycle Stage and cost separately)	Project Planning: $3,500,000 (Safety Assessment to Mitigate At-Grade Crossings; Columbus Convention Center Station Design; ROW Analysis for Future Rail Corridors; Rail-Oriented Development Analysis and Governance Framework) Project Development: $1,300,000 (Columbus Convention Center Station Design)
Is right of way acquisition (ROW) part of this funding request?	No
Cities, State(s) where the project is located	Central Ohio Region, including the communities of Columbus, Delaware, Dublin, Lancaster, Marion, Marysville, and Newark. See MORPC's 15 County Region in Figure 1
Congressional Districts where the project is located	OH-02, OH-03, OH-04, OH-12, OH-15
Geospatial data for project location(s) in decimal degrees (with at least five decimal places of precision).	Station location: 39.97077N, 83.00109W. Other locations: See Table 5 in Section 9
Current Lifecycle Stage of project at time of application	Systems Planning
Anticipated completion date of current Lifecycle Stage	December 31, 2026

Application Lifecyle Stage(s) proposed to be funded by this NOFO	Project Development: Columbus Convention Center Station Design Project Planning: Safety Assessment to Mitigate At-Grade Crossings; Columbus Convention Center Station Design; ROW Analysis for New, Expanded Service; Rail-Oriented Development Analysis and Governance Framework
Existing Intercity Passenger Rail service(s) on routes not more than 750 miles benefiting from the project	N/A
If applicable, existing Long-Distance service(s) (routes greater than 750 miles) benefiting from the project	N/A
If applicable, existing Commuter Rail service(s) benefitting from the project	N/A
If applicable, what Corridor, as identified in FY 2022 CID Selections, is benefitting from the project	Chicago-Fort Wayne-Columbus-Pittsburgh (Midwest Connect) Corridor Cleveland-Columbus-Dayton-Cincinnnati (3C+D) Corridor
Host Railroad/infrastructure owner(s) of project assets and property	Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT), Ohio Rail Development Commission (ORDC), CSX Transportation, Norfolk Southern Corporation, Columbus and Ohio River (CUOH), a division of Genesee & Wyoming Inc., Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority (Convention Center Authority)
Other impacted Railroad(s)	N/A
Tenant Railroad(s), if applicable	N/A
If applicable, is a 49 U.S.C. 22905-compliant Railroad Agreement in place or pending?	N/A
LOI/PFA requested?	Yes
If LOI requested for Projects in Project Development, provide amount of future request of Final Design/Construction request.	$150,000,000
If PFA requested for Final Design and Construction:	N/A
Provide amount of request under this NOFO for initial obligation	N/A
Provide amount of request under this NOFO for contingent commitment (equal to the remaining amount of the project cost).	N/A

Heartland Rail Connectivity Initiative Webpage:
https://www.morpc.org/rail-fsp/

2. PROJECT SUMMARY

The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC), with the support of the Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority (Convention Center Authority), is applying for funding for the Heartland Rail Connectivity Initiative (Heartland Rail) to increase rail safety at existing crossings, expand fully-grade separated passenger rail service, and enhance rail connectivity and reliability while supporting existing passenger rail development efforts for two Corridor Identification and Development (Corridor ID) projects that intersect in Columbus, Ohio.

Central Ohio is the fastest growing region in the Midwest and is projected to have more than 3 million residents by 2050. This growth is fueled by major economic development, including more than $30 billion combined in investment by Intel, Anduril, and Honda. Foreseeing the increased travel needs resulting from this extraordinary growth, voters approved a 2024 ballot initiative to invest $8 billion in regional transit and mobility projects through the Central Ohio Transit Authority's LinkUS program. Likewise, a new $2 billion terminal is under construction at the John Glenn Columbus International Airport.

Heartland Rail will enhance the regional rail network needed to support Central Ohio's growth, and boost job growth and retention in communities along passenger rail corridors.

FIGURE 1. PROJECT LOCATION



MORPC by the Numbers

- *MORPC study area covers 15 counties.*
- *MORPC serves as MPO, RTPO, and Economic Development District.*
- *MORPC developed initial NEPA studies of the Midwest Connect Corridor in 2018-19.*
- *Central Ohio is the fastest growing region in the Midwest.*
- *The 15-county region is home to young families. It has a 0.9% higher rate of births per 1,000 people than the national rate, and a median age that is 7% lower than the US as a whole.*
- *MORPC has partnered with other states, cities, and towns on the two Columbus-serving Corridor IDs.*

3. PROJECT FUNDING

Heartland Rail is requesting $4.8 million in FSP funding, which is 80% of the total project cost of $6.0 million (Table 1). The $1.2 million local match is being provided by the Convention Center Authority, which has already committed the funds in a Letter of Commitment (Appendix A). This match funding is not time restricted. Other than this FSP request, no other federal funds are being used for this initiative.

TABLE 1. SOURCES AND USES OF FUNDS

Task	Heartland Rail Component and Lifecycle Stage	Cost	Percentage of Total Cost	Source of Funds and Citiation, as applicable
1	Project Administration and Management	$523,888	9%	
2	Safety Assessment to Mitigate At-Grade Crossings Lifecycle Stage: Project Planning	$1,000,000	17%	
3	Columbus Convention Center Station Design Lifecycle Stage: Project Planning & Project Development	$2,500,000	42%	Includes $1,200,000 local match from Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority (see Funding Commitment Letter in Appendix A)
4	Right-of-Way Analysis for New, Expanded Service Lifecycle Stage: Project Planning	$1,575,000	26%	
5	Rail-Oriented Development Analysis and Governance Framework Lifecycle Stage: Project Planning	$401,112	7%	
TOTAL PROJECT COST		**$6,000,000**	**100%**	
Federal FSP Funding requested in this application		$4,800,000	80%	
Non-Federal Funding (Local)		Cash: $1,200,000	20%	Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority (see Funding Committment Letter in Appendix A)
Other Federal Funding		$0	0%	

LETTER OF INTENT

MORPC requests a Letter of Intent to support the final design and construction of the Columbus Convention Center Passenger Rail Station. MORPC and partners across Central Ohio are invested in passenger rail and committed to creating a safe and reliable rail network that strengthens this growing region. Heartland Rail requests $150,000,000 in a Letter of Intent to support the station and associated project milestones (Table 2). This request for final design and construction is a high-level estimate that will be refined throughout the Project Planning and Project Design phases.

TABLE 2. FORECASTED FUNDING MILESTONES FOR THE COLUMBUS CONVENTION CENTER PASSENGER RAIL STATION

Lifecycle Stage	Milestone	Future FSP Program Request
Project Development	60% Design	$6,000,000
	90% Design	$3,000,000
Final Design	Final Design	$1,000,000
Construction	Construction	$140,000,000
TOTAL FUTURE PROJECT COST	$150,000,000	

4. APPLICANT ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The applicant is the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC), the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the Greater Columbus Ohio region. As a “public agency or publicly chartered authority” established by the state of Ohio[1], MORPC is an eligible applicant under Section 3(a) of the NOFO. MORPC’s planning area covers 15 counties, shown in Figure 1.

5. PROJECT ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The Heartland Rail Connectivity Initiative is eligible for the FSP grant program as a project that will expand or establish new intercity passenger rail service (category iii). It specifically fits under category v. regarding planning, environmental studies, and design.

The Heartland Rail Connectivity Initiative lays the groundwork to **expand and establish new intercity passenger rail service** by conducting the required planning and environmental studies for service. The project will **improve safety** at existing at-grade rail crossings, and will avoid such conflicts in the future by identifying fully grade-separated right of way alignment for passenger rail service. A dedicated, grade-separated rail corridor is essential to providing high-performance intercity passenger rail service with higher speeds and greater reliability. The project will prepare the region for passenger rail service to and across central Ohio, providing national passenger rail connectivity to high-demand destinations including the Columbus Convention Center, the Ohio State University, Downtown Columbus, and the John Glenn International Airport.

6. CORRIDOR IDENTIFICATION PROGRAM COORDINATION

Heartland Rail's components are essential to the rapid implementation of two federally selected Corridor ID corridors:

- Chicago, Fort Wayne, Columbus, and Pittsburgh (Midwest Connect)
- Cleveland-Columbus-Dayton-Cincinnati (3C+D)

Both corridors completed Step 1 and are preparing for Step 2 of the Corridor ID process, by actively working with FRA staff to revise deliverables in accordance with new federal guidance for the Step 2 Core

1 MORPC operates under section 713.21 of the Ohio Revised Code: https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-713.21

Service Development Plan.

The Heartland Rail Connectivity Initiative **augments** the passenger service delivery of the Corridor ID projects, but has independent utility. Heartland Rail will inform and facilitate – not preclude – the critical decision-making outcomes of Step 2.

FIGURE 2. CORRIDOR ID PROJECTS IN OHIO



7. DETAILED PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Central Ohio is one of America's key urban centers driving growth in the 21st Century, projected to grow 35% by 2050 to a population of over 3 million. At the heart of the region is Ohio's capital city, Columbus, one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. Now home to 2.5 million residents, Central Ohio is a thriving region and a leader in logistics, education, healthcare, technology, and agriculture. Recent investments from Amazon, Anduril, Cologix, Google, Intel, and Microsoft have solidified Central Ohio as America's 'Silicon Heartland'. Columbus is also the second-largest city in the United States not on the national passenger rail network[2].

Heartland Rail represents an opportunity to leverage and maximize the benefit of public investment. MORPC's request will enable Central Ohio leaders to lay a foundation that will amplify and accelerate rail investments, identify new opportunities for private passenger rail service providers, and expedite the long overdue return of passenger trains to Central Ohio, providing enhanced connectivity for the Midwest.

Key elements for the restoration of passenger rail to be addressed now include identifying at-grade crossing improvement opportunities, initiating right-of-way opportunities to expand passenger rail service, enhancing partnerships with right-of-way owners, and designing the primary Columbus Convention Center Passenger Rail Station to usher in a new period of rail travel in Central Ohio.

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_major_cities_in_the_United_States_lacking_inter-city_rail_service

A. PROJECT SCOPE

Heartland Rail consists of five components designed to expand and establish intercity passenger rail service in Central Ohio and prepare the MORPC region and the State of Ohio to leverage the benefits passenger rail connectivity offers.

TASK 1: PROJECT ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT

As the project sponsor, MORPC will complete project adminsitration and management tasks related to the federal award and the project components listed below. Details regarding MORPC's capabilites and experience in managing federal grants can be found in Section 11.

TASK 2: SAFETY ASSESSMENT TO MITIGATE AT-GRADE CROSSINGS

Heartland Rail will conduct safety studies to assess at-grade crossings along existing rail and future passenger rail alignments in the 15-county region to determine where grade separations or other safety measures are recommended, prioritizing crossings with train-involved crash history. This component will determine which crossings need to be improved, separated, or closed to enable passenger rail speeds that are competitive with auto travel, and will develop conceptual designs for each recommended grade crossing improvement. High-level environmental impact analysis and costs of these improvements will be estimated, yielding critical information for passenger rail corridor development and for other state, local, and freight partners to improve safety for all railroad users.

TASK 3: COLUMBUS CONVENTION CENTER STATION DESIGN

The Columbus Convention Center Station Design component is led by the Convention Center Authority, who is providing preliminary engineering and pre-NEPA work to build on the Columbus Convention Center Passenger Rail Station concepts developed in 2021 (Appendix B). Active CSX and Norfolk Southern freight rail tracks run on a lower level underneath the taxi and valet drop-off location serving the Greater Columbus Convention Center and nearby hotels. At the intersection of proposed north-south and east-west rail corridors, the Convention Center Station will be a high-volume transfer point, and a high-value real estate opportunity, for the national rail network.

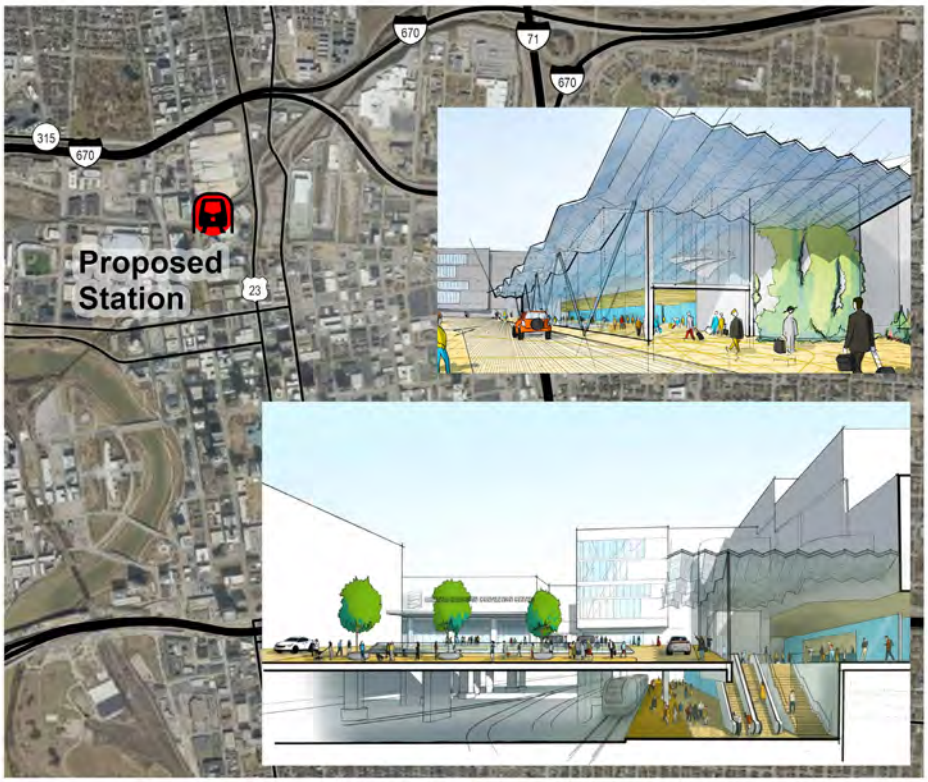


FIGURE 3. CONVENTION CENTER STATION SITE

The Greater Columbus Convention Center, offering more than 370,000 sq. ft. of exhibition space, attracts millions of visitors each year. Located in downtown Columbus, it offers easy proximity to the arts district, retail, restaurants, and the three major sporting venues of Nationwide Arena, Huntington Park, and ScottsMiracle-Gro Field. The Convention Center is one of Ohio's largest trip-generating destinations, walking distance from Columbus' central business district, and readily accessible to the expanding local bus and bus rapid transit services.

The scope of work includes 10-15% preliminary engineering, pre-NEPA environmental analysis, architectural renderings and public outreach. This task explores platform and track locations, integration with freight rail traffic, pedestrian/passenger movement, intermodal connections to existing and future transit/taxi/ride share and other services, links with the convention center and surrounding hotels, and the design of an exciting, inviting station that welcomes residents, tourists, and business travelers to the heart of Ohio.



FIGURE 4. HISTORIC UNION STATION

The Columbus Convention Center is the site of Columbus' historic Union Station, which served rail passengers until the late 1970s. The Convention Center Authority is proud to host the new rail station that re-connects Columbus to the national passenger rail network. As a public authority vested in supporting regional development, the Convention Center Authority will design the station as a multimodal hub, making it easy for local, state, and national travelers to connect to jobs, education, cultural, and healthcare opportunities throughout the region. The Convention Center Authority will also continue to ensure a welcoming environment for all visitors, with ample public meeting venues, numerous hotels, a wide variety of eating and drinking establishments within walking distance, full ADA compliance, nursing mother rooms, and over 4,000 parking spaces. In addition to major regional business, sales, and professional events, the convention center hosts national and international sporting events, religious conferences, and regional cultural events targeting a wide variety of age groups.

TASK 4: RIGHT-OF-WAY ANALYSIS FOR NEW, EXPANDED SERVICE

Heartland Rail will conduct a comprehensive right-of-way analysis for dedicated, grade-separated non-freight rail corridors, including, but not limited to, freeways, utility easements, and other limited-access corridors to determine alternative route options to support new intercity passenger rail. Right-of-way tasks will examine new passenger rail alignment concepts for Central Ohio. Specific scope items include:

Existing Conditions: This task examines in detail the existing freeway and other limited-access right-of-way corridors through Central Ohio, investigating alignments for curvature and speed restrictions, grade crossings, current and projected vehicle traffic levels, and identifying chokepoints.

Project Planning: Early planning work will be carried out to:

- Identify corridor capacity where new right-of-way could be purchased to make intercity passenger service more efficient
- Analyze clearance and cross-sections to evaluate passenger rail integration at overpasses and bridges

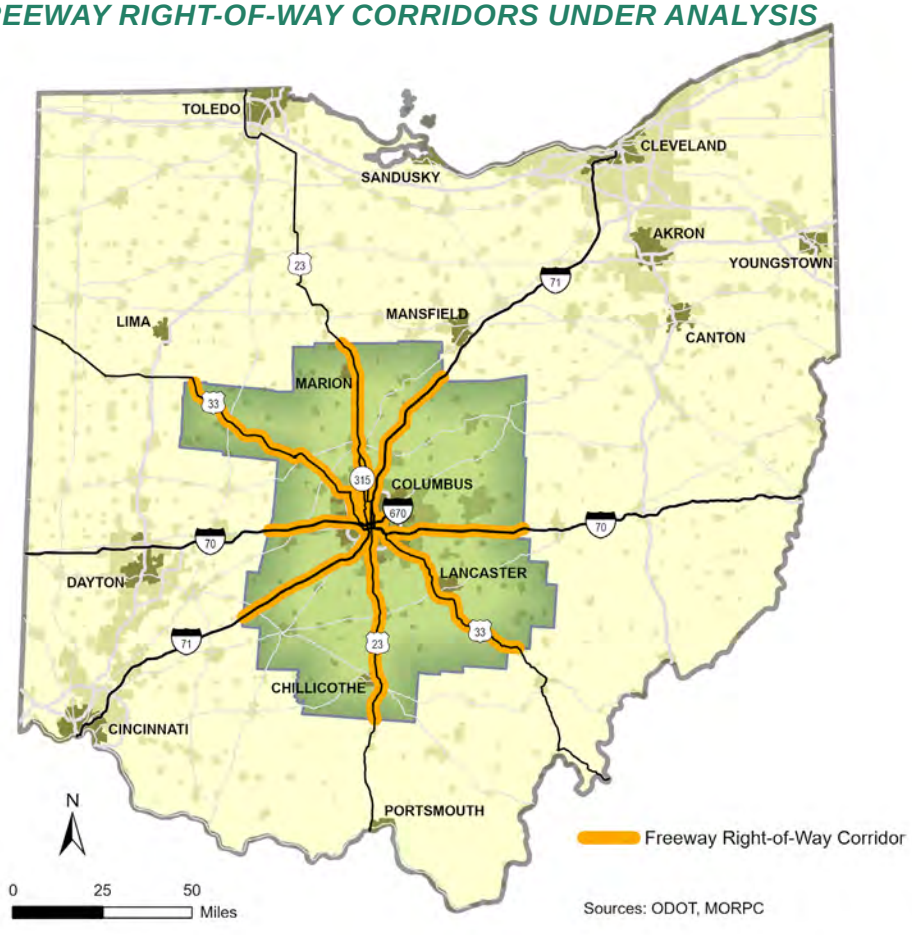
- Determine utility relocation impacts and other infrastructure coordination for proposed passenger rail corridors
- Prepare for future environmental impact analysis requirements by completing an environmental and land use inventory
- Develop cost estimates for passenger rail construction and implementation, including land acquisition, utility relocation, and construction costs

Airport Access: This task examines the existing freight rail corridor and non-rail right-of-way between the Convention Center and John Glenn Columbus International Airport. It explores the question of whether rail connectivity between these two destinations provides enough economic value to attract private rail operators and build regional support for a larger passenger rail network. This study will also evaluate the benefits to consumers arising from savings in cost and travel time.

Planning and early engineering work will be done on the proposed connections between the Columbus Convention Center Passenger Rail Station and the airport's main passenger terminal, looking at potential alignments, integration with the existing transportation network, ease of access, and environmental and right-of-way impacts.

Owner Discussions and Stakeholder Engagement: The Right-of-Way Analysis component will include the necessary work of facilitating discussions with right-of-way owners, and other stakeholders within and outside the MORPC region to develop a shared vision and plan of action for incorporating new rail service on the Central Ohio transportation network. This process supports future implementation phases of Heartland Rail by performing public outreach activities and developing agreements with owners.

FIGURE 5. FREEWAY RIGHT-OF-WAY CORRIDORS UNDER ANALYSIS



TASK 5: RAIL-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT ANALYSIS AND GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

When passenger rail service returns to Central Ohio, the Convention Center Authority and Central Ohio communities must be prepared to leverage this new mode to maximize regional benefits. This task explores ways in which rail-oriented development can be facilitated, and how that development can be focused to support passenger needs and activity.

An important part of this effort, which ties in with other Heartland Rail components, is assessing value capture – in particular, examining how passenger rail development benefits can directly support station and rail infrastructure upkeep and operations, and maximize economic impacts of station area real estate development, making rail service more reliable and sustainable, enhancing its attractiveness for private operators, and reducing the need for subsidy. This deliverable will also evaluate the potential social, environmental and economic benefits for the region, with a focus on business growth, workforce development, new housing projects, the tourism economy, and overall resident quality of life. The methods and findings of the Rail-Oriented Development Analysis component will be a resource that can be utilized for all proposed station locations.

This component also examines governance options for passenger rail advancement and delivery in Central Ohio. MORPC will work with ORDC, municipal partners, and other stakeholders to establish roles, responsibilities, and decision-making for assembling ROW, overseeing system construction, and managing ongoing operations & maintenance of passenger rail in Ohio. This work is complex, involving multiple cities and counties. Understanding organizational capacity, reaching agreements with partners, and identifying governance-related risks now will greatly accelerate implementation of passenger rail.

B. PROJECT SCHEDULE

Upon the successful award of this FSP Grant request, all components of Heartland Rail can begin as soon as January 2027, and be completed within 24 months.

TABLE 3. PROJECT SCHEDULE

Task	Heartland Rail Component	Schedule
1	Project Administration and Management	January 1, 2027 to December 31, 2028 Completion of Project Planning and Project Development Stages
2	Safety Assessment to Mitigate At-Grade Crossings	18 months: January 1, 2027 to June 30, 2028 Completion of Project Planning Stage
3	Columbus Convention Center Station Design	24 months: January 1, 2027 to December 31, 2027 Completion of Project Planning Stage; January 1, 2028 to December 31, 2028 Completion of Project Development Stage
4	Right-of-Way Analysis for New, Expanded Service	24 months: January 1, 2027 to December 31, 2028 Completion of Project Planning Stage
5	Rail-Oriented Development Analysis and Governance Framework	18 months: January 1, 2027 to June 30, 2028 Completion of Project Planning Stage

C. ADDRESSING TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES

Heartland Rail's goal is to facilitate decision-making and expedite implementation of the Midwest Connect and 3C+D corridors, identify potential new passenger rail corridors, and maximize return on investment to attract private service providers. With this vision, the transportation challenges that Heartland Rail addresses are summarized below:

Existing transportation options do not meet Corridor travel needs: Current air service along both Corridor IDs can be expensive compared to other modes. While the travel times from airport-to-airport are shorter than drive times, air travel involves wait times for security procedures, parking, and reaching downtown centers. Furthermore, the distances between many of the corridors' station cities are too short to support a non-stop passenger air market, yet too long to efficiently drive on a regular basis – an ideal market gap for passenger rail to fill.

Bus service is low cost, but infrequent, indirect, and much slower than auto travel times.

Auto travel can be expensive for individuals who do not own a vehicle, and is not an option for non-drivers, such as youth and individuals with visual or other impairments. Further, congestion is continuing to grow (Table 7), and there is no direct interstate service between Columbus and Chicago, or between Columbus and Toledo/Detroit.

Rail is also a less stressful, and more comfortable and convenient option for many travelers compared to driving or flying.

Existing transportation options are not reliable: Auto, bus, and air travel are subject to traffic congestion and weather-related delays.

Safety is a concern for existing vehicle travel: Autos, and to a lesser extent buses, are subject to the well-known safety concerns of vehicle travel, including crashes from speeding, distracted driving, and weather-related issues. Also, snow and ice conditions, common in the Midwest, impact vehicle trip safety more than rail trips.

Existing transportation options have relatively high environmental impacts: Compared to rail, air and vehicle travel have higher emissions per passenger and utilize more energy. A shift to high-occupancy rail transportation will significantly reduce emissions and energy use. Rail offers an efficient solution: it takes 16 highway lanes to carry as many people per hour as a two-track railroad. Additionally, railroads offer reduced impervious surface pavement compared to highways, which has benefits for drainage and water quality, and is a more efficient use of land[3].

Managing growth: The Central Ohio business community is demanding safer and more reliable travel options, particularly as population growth is putting pressure on existing transportation infrastructure. America's Heartland is at a disadvantage compared to coastal cities which have long-established passenger rail systems.

Unlike many midwestern cities, Columbus is growing, and to continue our employment and business growth we need to be able to attract talent. As a rapidly-growing region we have the opportunity to shape development around high-capacity national travel assets and corridors, but we need to move swiftly. The Heartland Rail initiative will ensure that Central Ohio can continue to grow, and to do so in a way that is safer, more resilient, reliable, and family-friendly.

3 Source: Passsenger Rail Association

D. CURRENT AND PROPOSED RAILROAD OPERATIONS

PASSENGER RAIL

Currently there is no passenger rail service in Central Ohio. Proposed rail service for the Midwest Connect and 3C+D corridors are shown in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4. PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE LEVELS (RANGE OF STEP 1 ALTERNATIVES)

Service Characteristic	3C+D	Midwest Connect
Expected Frequency	3 daily round trips	2-6 daily round trips
Projected Annual Ridership	385,000	387,000 to 917,000
Estimated Speed	47 mph (avg. including dwell time at stations)	79 or 110 mph, depending on alternative

FREIGHT RAIL

Ohio has the fourth-highest track miles of rail in the US. As a medium-sized state, this gives Ohio one of the densest rail networks in the nation (see Figure 6).

Freight rail service in Central Ohio is provided by CSX, Norfolk Southern, Columbus & Ohio River Railroad (CUOH), and the Indiana and Ohio Railway (IORY). There is also a short line switching railroad, the Camp Chase Railway (CAMY).

CSX and Norfolk Southern are busy Class I railroads, both of which have railyards located in Franklin County. They share tracks in a congested corridor that passes underneath the Convention Center, I-670, and other innerbelt highways through central Columbus.

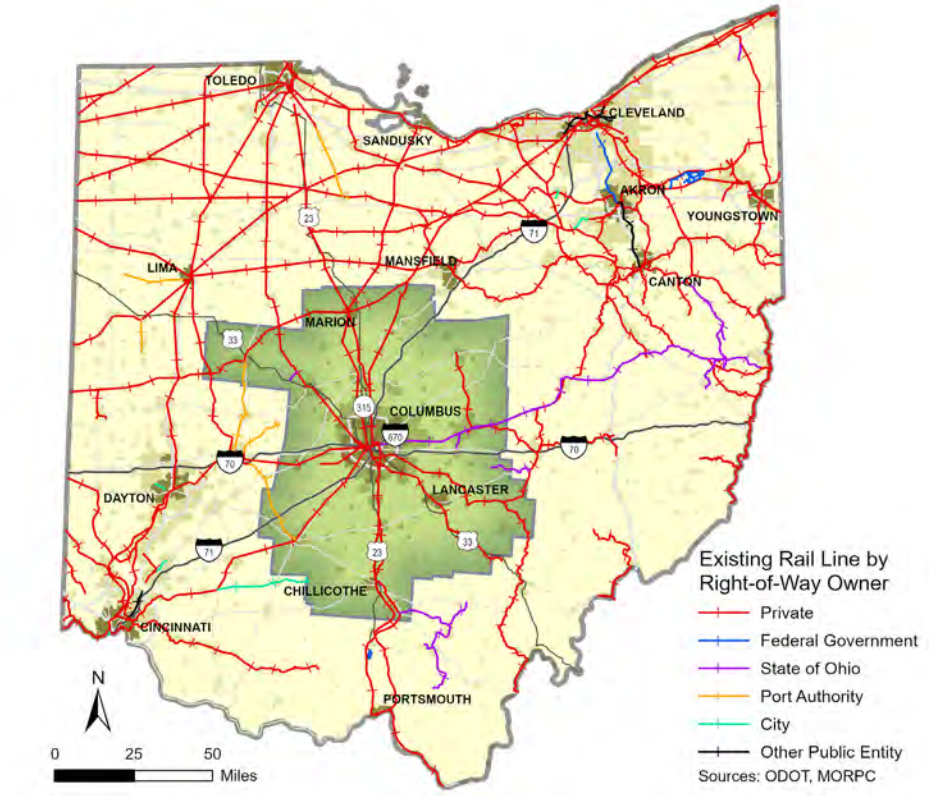


FIGURE 6. OHIO RAIL MAP

Also of note is the Panhandle subdivision – a rail corridor running from Columbus northeast to Mingo Junction, OH. Mingo Junction is near the Pennsylvania border, and is 40 miles east of Pittsburgh, the eastern terminus of Midwest Connect. Freight service along the Panhandle is provided by CUOH which is currently installing a second track on the subdivision to handle growth in freight traffic.

E. USERS AND BENEFICIARIES

The primary beneficiaries of Heartland Rail are the residents, workers, and visitors to the future passenger rail service area. In Central Ohio, MORPC serves the fastest growing region in the Midwest, a 15-county area of 2.5 million residents, projected to grow to a population of 3.1 million by 2050.

With both proposed passenger rail projects connecting to Amtrak's national long-distance network via the Floridian, Cardinal, and additional routes serving Chicago, a secondary group of expected beneficiaries are riders from outside Ohio who will have an additional mode choice available to reach America's Heartland cities.

The benefit for the future passengers is discussed above in Section 7C on transportation challenges, as rail provides an option that is safer and more reliable and accessible than other modes, and can be time-competitive for travelers seeking to avoid congestion, parking, and delays.

Economic Development and Jobs: The cities with station stops along future passenger rail routes will benefit from increased tourism and business travel, and gain access to an expanded talent pool. While it is not expected that many residents will use the service for commuting, passenger rail provides an option for business travel, making it easier to attend conventions, sporting events, health care facilities, and education/training opportunities. In Greater Columbus alone, there are 53 million visitor trips annually for purposes such as conventions, trade shows, and sporting events, bringing over $8.2 billion in spending, and supporting more than 82,500 jobs[4]. Restoring passenger rail service to Columbus will provide easier access for more potential visitors, including students. Ohio's future rail corridors are home to dozens of colleges and universities, with combined student populations in the hundreds of thousands. Many college students do not have cars, and passenger rail availability will make travel for educational conferences or cultural events, and trips to visit friends and relatives, much easier.

Military Personnel: By strengthening the passenger transportation network, Heartland Rail will enhance the connectivity of installations critical to defense. The Columbus suburb of Whitehall, along the Midwest Connect corridor, is home to the Defense Supply Center Columbus (DSCC), one of three Inventory Control Points of the Defense Logistics Agency. DSCC, employing approximately 7,300 personnel, provides vital weapons system and platform support to U.S. forces and federal agencies worldwide. It manages over two million unique inventory parts supporting thousands of multiservice weapons systems. Located in Dayton, a station city on the 3C+D Corridor, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base (WPAFB) is the largest base operated by the Air Force on U.S. territory. Among its many assets, WPAFB is headquarters for the Air Force Material Command, the Air Force Institute of Technology, and the National Space Intelligence Center, and has a workforce of approximately 38,000 personnel. And in 2023, Mansfield became home to the first-ever Cyberspace Wing in the Air National Guard. In addition to being vital to national defense, these installations support local economies. Restoring passenger rail as a transportation option will enhance efficiency of travel between these facilities and provide improved travel options for military families.

Freight Rail Service: To the extent that Heartland Rail recommendations lead to safety and track improvements that benefit freight rail, there will be efficiency benefits that make freight movements faster, safer, and more reliable.

Airport Access: If Heartland Rail sees benefits in implementing this component as an initial phase of the Corridor IDs, there will be substantial travel time and other benefits for John Glenn International Airport's 9 million yearly air travelers.

4 Source: https://www.experiencecolumbus.com/articles/post/2025-state-of-the-visitor-industry-mid-year-report/

F. PROJECT OUTCOMES

MORPC, the Convention Center Authority, and other project partners envision that the Heartland Rail project outcomes will expand on Central Ohio's current passenger rail planning to better prepare the region for new intercity passenger rail. Each component of Heartland Rail works together to augment and expedite the return of intercity passenger rail service to Central Ohio.

Heartland Rail's success will be measured by exploring new rail service in the region and between key destinations, like the John Glenn International Airport, improving Columbus Convention Center Station design plans, identifying at-grade crossing safety improvements, developing a framework for local communities to leverage rail station development, and preparing for future implementation and delivery. Additional project outcomes include facilitating the implementation of all Heartland Rail project components, including obtaining a Letter of Intent with the FRA to develop a partnership for future funding and implementation.

8. SAFETY BENEFIT DATA

The safety benefits of Heartland Rail derive from two sources. The most direct safety benefit will be from implementation of the grade crossing recommendations from the Safety Assessment.

As Figure 7 shows, there are 1,104 public at-grade crossings in the MORPC region. Six crossings along planned passenger rail alignments in Central Ohio have had one or more crashes in the past five years, and Heartland Rail will likely prioritize these for grade separation or other improvements. Grade separations and crossing closures eliminate the risk of highway-rail crashes. Grade separations also ensure that emergency responders can swiftly respond to calls without any delay from active rail travel.

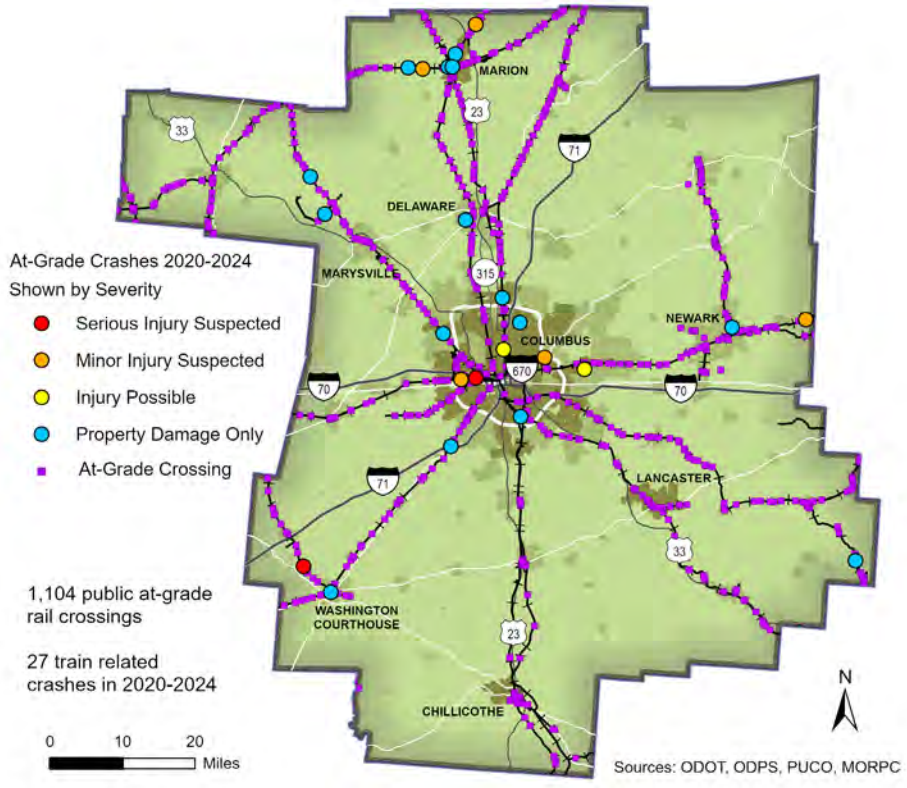


FIGURE 7. GRADE CROSSING INCIDENTS IN CENTRAL OHIO, 2020-2024

The largest safety benefit of Heartland Rail comes from its effectiveness in expediting and enhancing the restoration of new passenger rail service to Central Ohio, which will reduce vehicle miles traveled. Data from existing intercity passenger rail service shows that for every 1 billion passenger-miles shifted from cars to intercity rail, approximately 6.6 lives are saved[5]. The number of injuries avoided is much higher. Current vehicle crash statistics for 2021-2025 show an average of 45,100 crashes per year in the MORPC 15-county region, with over 200 fatalities each year, and more than 12,000 injuries.

5 Source: National Safety Council, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, and the Rail Passengers Association

9. PROJECT LOCATION

The Heartland Rail project location consists of MORPC's 15-county region (Figure 1), with specific project locations varying for each component. A summary of locations and associated geometric data and congressional districts are listed below in Table 5.

TABLE 5. PROJECT LOCATION DATA

Task	Project Location	Latitude	Longitude	Congressional District
2. Safety Assessment to Mitigate At-Grade Crossings	All at-grade crossings along passenger rail alignments within study area	Along existing track within 40.70311N and 39.89170N Along existing track within 40.09404N and 40.51228N	Along existing track within 83.05276W and 83.55097W Along existing track within 82.19080W and 83.56244W	OH-02, OH-03, OH-04, OH-12, OH-15
3. Columbus Convention Center Station Design	Greater Columbus Convention Center	39.97077N	83.00109W	OH-03; OH-15
4. Right-of-Way Analysis for New, Expanded Service	Future rail corridor(s) to be determined	N/A	N/A	OH-02, OH-03, OH-04, OH-12, OH-15
	John Glenn International Airport	39.99837N	82.89684W	OH-03

10. EVALUATION AND SELECTION CRITERIA

A. PROJECT READINESS

MORPC is a proven leader in preparing Central Ohio for the return of passenger rail service. In 2010, MORPC supported ODOT and ORDC in the Ohio 3C Quick Start Passenger Rail Service initiative (Appendix C), which is the basis for the 3C+D Corridor ID today. MORPC's 2019 Rapid Speed Transportation Initiative (Appendix D) also explored hyperloop feasibility and ultimately developed alignments for the current Midwest Connect Corridor ID.

MORPC will start work on the Heartland Rail project components as early as January 2027. Sponsorship by MORPC and the Convention Center Authority, coupled with the established culture of partnership and collaboration in Central Ohio, sets the region up for success in carrying out this project. Multiple municipalities, property, and right-of-way owners in the study area, including the Convention Center Authority and the City of Columbus, provided one of the many support letters in Appendix E.

B. TECHNICAL MERIT

MORPC Qualifications

MORPC is uniquely positioned to lead the Heartland Rail Connectivity Initiative. A regional council with 93 local government members, MORPC serves as the region's voice, a trusted convener, and catalyst for bringing together Central Ohio's communities to collaborate, share best practices, and plan for the growth and sustainability of the region. MORPC staffs the Central Ohio Rural Planning Organization, which serves as the rural transportation planning organization (RTPO) for seven surrounding counties. MORPC is also the U.S.-designated Economic Development District for 11 Central Ohio counties. Additionally, MORPC serves as a major partner to many Central Ohio organizations and initiatives, including LinkUS, an $8B investment led by the Central Ohio Transit Authority to improve transit and transit-supportive infrastructure across the region. MORPC also convenes the Central Ohio Passenger Rail Advisory Council, which consists of multiple communities, to advise and steer passenger rail planning in Central Ohio.

MORPC has considerable experience leading projects of this size, having managed prior intercity rail and transit studies, including the 2019 Rapid Speed Transportation Initiative (predecessor to the Midwest Connect Corridor ID; see Appendix D), and the Insight2050 Corridor Concepts project that developed recommendations for major regional thoroughfares. MORPC also has demonstrated experience with federally funded projects, including four USDOT Safe Streets and Roads for All grant awards totaling over $8.5 million. MORPC consistently manages larger projects with a team including experienced agency leaders, sub-award recipients, and competitively-selected consulting engineers and planners, and ensures that the work is done on time and within budget. In addition, as the designated MPO for the Columbus Urbanized Area, MORPC is responsible for carrying out the federal transportation planning process, including regularly updating the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (long-range transportation plan, an effort requiring outreach and coordination, as well as expertise and compliance with federal transportation planning regulations.

Additional information on MORPC's management plan for Heartland Rail is in Section 11 below. MORPC's experience partnering with cities and municipalities, and with other regions and states, is the foundation for the success of Heartland Rail.

Convention Center Authority Qualifications

The Convention Center Authority will lead the Columbus Convention Center Station Design component in cooperation with MORPC. The Convention Center Authority has experience with facility plans and design projects from previous years, including a major Convention Center redesign in 2017. It also managed the architectural and engineering consultants who developed the early planning concepts for the Convention Center rail station in 2021 (Appendix B). The Convention Center Authority's capacity to deliver complex projects is further underscored by the recent $250 million expansion of the Hilton Columbus Downtown. This investment, located directly adjacent to the Convention Center and within feet of potential multimodal interfaces, exemplifies the Convention Center Authority's ability to execute major capital developments that enhance the region's visitor ecosystem.

Consistency with Federal Plans

Heartland Rail is designed to leverage Step 2 tasks for the two FRA-selected Corridor ID corridors that intersect in the MORPC region. The Corridor ID corridors are included in multiple state and MPO plans, including the Ohio State Rail Plan (Appendix F), Pennsylvania DOT's Advancing PA Rail Plan (Appendix G), and MORPC's 2024-2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (Appendix H).

Innovative Financing and Private Sector Participation

MORPC and our project partners will examine the potential for private investment in passenger rail. Heartland Rail's **Rail-Oriented Development Analysis and Governance Framework** component specifically includes an assessment of value capture mechanisms for funding station and rail operations, and the **Right-of-Way Analysis for New, Expanded Service** components will include assessments of private operation potential, and an examination of policies to encourage private investment. MORPC recently held discussions with Brightline, and brought local leaders to visit their sites in Florida and Las

Vegas. The Convention Center Authority already utilizes private operators for its hotel and parking properties, and the **Columbus Convention Center Station Design** component will incorporate a variety of spaces for commercial use (e.g., coffee shops, gift shops) to support the station.

C. PROJECT BENEFITS

System Performance Benefits

Heartland Rail will expedite the implementation of new passenger rail service through Central Ohio. The **Columbus Convention Center Station Design** component will consider rail efficiency (in terms of platform and track placement), as well as seamless passenger flow through the facility, to minimize transfer times to transit and other "last mile" options. The **Safety Assessment** will examine crossing and track geometry upgrades that improve freight rail efficiency and the speed of future passenger rail service.

Safety

As discussed in Section 8 above, Heartland Rail has multiple safety benefits. The greatest benefit will be the eventual reduction in vehicle travel from a mode shift to passenger rail, reducing the likelihood of crashes with serious injury or fatality. Passenger rail expansion will support efforts to create a safe transportation network with multiple solutions to end crash-related fatality and serious injury. Additionally, the **Safety Assessment** component focuses on upgrading, separating, or closing at-grade crossings along both Corridor IDs to reduce or eliminate crashes. The **Station Design** will incorporate pedestrian, bicycle, and transit facilities that improve upon the safety levels at the site currently.

Resilience and Air Quality Benefits

In a reality where both air and auto or bus travel can experience weather-related delays, and roads frequently experience delays due to crashes, construction, or simply daily congestion, passenger rail service offers a more reliable mode of travel. Such an alternative, especially for a growing, thriving metropolis, is essential to building resilience in the region. Heartland Rail's **Station Design** and other components will also incorporate resilience best practices into design, to ensure that Central Ohio's transportation infrastructure investments can withstand flooding and other weather-related events.

Air quality will benefit by reducing vehicle miles traveled. According to federal statistics for 2025 , the average car emits 72 pounds of carbon dioxide during an average 100 mile trip. Energy use per trip is also much higher for vehicle trips, with an average 2,787 Btu per passenger mile in a personal vehicle, compared to 1,506 Btu for intercity passenger rail. Lower energy use promotes resilience in the transportation network when there are fuel price fluctuations or supply disruptions.

Economic Benefits

Economic Competitiveness

Economic competitiveness is greatly enhanced by improved transportation choices. Limited transportation options mean that those who cannot drive, cannot afford a personal vehicle, or choose not to drive may be excluded from trips for work, personal, medical and other purposes.



FIGURE 8. MAJOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN OHIO

Ease of movement is critical for a region's economic development, especially for Ohio's strong and growing economy (Figure 8). This holds true for large cities, with numerous businesses and higher demand for intercity travel, as well as for smaller municipalities with economic bases dependent on businesses in nearby metropolitan areas.

An effective and reliable passenger rail service offers young people, seniors, and individuals with disabilities the ability to travel long distances without cars, providing access to education, business opportunities, cultural events and other opportunities. It also augments workforce development by enabling businesses to draw from a larger talent pool newly able to travel longer distances for better employment opportunities.

Passenger rail can also reduce the cost of living by reducing the need for families to purchase multiple cars. A typical Ohio household spends $13,781 per year on transportation costs, mostly from car ownership. On average, Ohio households spend 27% of income on transportation, slightly higher than the national average (22%) and 12 percentage points higher than the recommended threshold of affordability.

Benefits for Riders and Businesses

Like all transportation improvements, passenger rail offers ease of access. For businesses, passenger rail provides a convenient, affordable travel option that does not currently exist in the region, making it easier for employees to reach clients and job centers and to access training, conventions, and other business opportunities. For individuals, particularly those who are unable or choose not to drive, passenger rail provides a choice in mode of travel.

Benefits for Induced Trips

The benefit-cost analysis (BCA) examines the benefits of "mode shift" – where future trips ordinarily made by car or plane are instead made by rail. However, there are economic benefits from "induced travel" as well. These are trips that would not occur without passenger rail but become possible with availability of a new mode connecting city centers throughout the Heartland. These new trips improve quality of life and boost economic activity, increasing jobs and income in station cities. Examples include students able to come home from college more often, and who can now visit museums or cultural events in station cities. And elderly or vision-impaired individuals, people who have no access to a vehicle, or members of families that only have one car can now have an affordable, comfortable option for trips to cities on the national passenger rail network. Ohio's wide range of family-friendly tourist destinations (Figure 9), including amusement parks, zoos, museums, and historic villages, attracts more than 238 million visitors every year, with 53 million of those trips including Central Ohio.

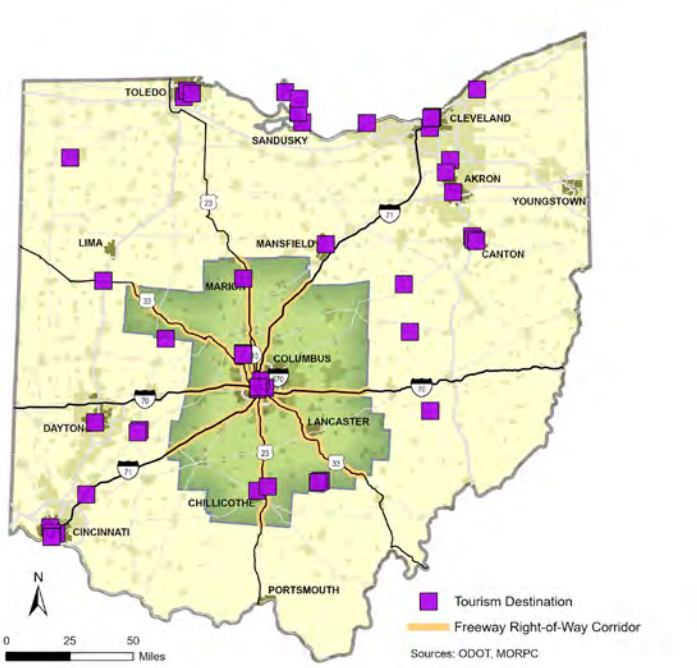


FIGURE 9. TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN OHIO

Economic Development in Station Cities

Central Ohio businesses will also benefit from increased jobs. Every $1 billion invested in public transportation supports 50,000 jobs. In addition to construction jobs, there will be permanent jobs to operate and maintain the station, as well as at cafes, restaurants, hotels, and other developments that serve travelers. Additional, less localized, benefits include increased use of taxi and rideshare services, more efficient use of existing local transit, higher attendance at tourist destinations, and an

improved quality of life that make it easier to attract employees or residents. A station that serves travelers throughout the day brings vitality to downtowns, making it easier for restaurants, shops, and entertainment venues to stay open.

Smaller corridor cities also benefit through connectivity on a well-planned rail network by becoming more accessible to larger cities along the corridor. As Central Ohio expands, access to its opportunities will generate growth, helping with job retention. The combination of growing population and enhanced connectivity will also increase day-trips and other tourism along the corridor. And all station cities will benefit from improved access to the businesses, universities, and other institutions in corridor cities of all sizes. An investment in passenger rail will support current businesses, and attract new investment to the region.

Fiscal Impact

The various economic effects described above will increase local tax revenues, including sales, hotel, income, and property taxes. The increase in property value near stations, in particular, can be tapped to pay for station and rail operations, or to cover the cost of additional security, landscaping, lighting, and other station-area maintenance needs.

Examples from peer cities highlight the value of passenger rail and station development, showcasing the impact these projects could have on Central Ohio's urban and suburban communities. Denver's $500 million redevelopment of Union Station transformed 42 acres of abandoned rail yards into a multimodal hub that spurred $3.5 billion in private development, generating $3 billion annually, and supporting 20,000 long-term jobs. Additionally, the revenues generated from using Tax Increment Financing was used to pay off $300 million in federal loans.

Redwood City, California serves as a small- to mid-size city example comparable to multiple communities in the Central Ohio region. Redwood City utilized its Caltrain Station to anchor a three-block radius of mixed-use development for housing, retail, and restaurants. This project increased the city's overall tax revenue by 15% to 20%. By turning underutilized land near the tracks into high-density use, Redwood City captured new real estate and sales tax revenue without expanding its geographic footprint.

Integration with Other Modes

MORPC and our partners recognize that integration with other modes of travel is essential in maximizing the use of future rail service. The Convention Center Authority understands how the busy Convention Center location is a "gateway" introducing and welcoming visitors to the region. Therefore, an essential component of the Columbus Convention Center Station Design is to ensure seamless movement of travelers between passenger rail and local transit, vehicle parking, pick-up and drop-off, taxi/ride share, and other services, including walking, bike and scooter rentals. The end product will be a transportation hub within a major business, tourist, and commercial district that easily accommodates large numbers of passengers.

The Convention Center currently has three multi-story parking garages, bike racks, a taxi loop for pick-up and drop-offs, and is close to 8 COTA bus routes, including the CMAX BRT line. Eleven additional local bus routes are within a 6-minute walk of the proposed station location. As noted previously, COTA's LinkUS initiative is investing $8 billion in improving transit service and active transportation facilities, and it is likely that bus service will expand at this location once passenger rail service begins.

Lastly, the Airport Access component would represent a major improvement in connecting the John Glenn International Airport to downtown Columbus and the broader region.

Ability to Meet Anticipated Demand

The MORPC region is expecting to add more than 600,000 residents over the next 25 years. Population growth in the region is driving an increase in road traffic. VMT has caught up to pre-COVID levels, and is continuing to rise, along with congestion (Table 7). There has been a corresponding increase in air travel, which has also recently exceeded the highs of 2019.

The John Glenn Columbus International Airport is building a new terminal (Figure 10) to accommodate this population growth and prepare for the increased passenger travel this will bring. This new terminal will handle up to 13 million passengers annually.



FIGURE 10. JOHN GLENN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT NEW TERMINAL

TABLE 6. TOTAL PASSENGERS AT THE JOHN GLENN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT[6]

Year	Annual Passengers
2018	8,101,699
2019	8,637,108
2020	3,269,127
2021	5,822,322
2022	7,455,031
2023	8,375,611
2024	8,965,614
2025	9,014,264

TABLE 7. CENTRAL OHIO VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED (VMT) DATA

		2021	2022	2023	2024
Daily VMT in the MPO Region	**Daily (thousands)**	35,060.88	36,641.66	36,133.02	37,437.41
VMT in the MPO Region Under Congested Conditions	**Daily**	5.0%	6.0%	7.0%	7.0%
	Peak Period	10.3%	9.6%	11.0%	13.0%

While passenger rail is unlikely to meet all the growth in travel demand, a single train with four passenger coach cars can accommodate 272 individuals. In fact the number is likely to be higher since few riders travel from end-to-end, and most will board or alight at an intermediate station. Assuming two round trips daily on just two passenger rail corridors, could easily carry a million or more passengers a year. This is not too far off from the future ridership estimates in Table 4 above. An important point is that passenger rail, once in place, can be easily expanded. Running four round trips daily would double capacity. Adding an extra passenger coach to each trainset would increase capacity

6 Source: http://flycolumbus.com/operations-statistics

by 25%. Neither of these options are without cost, but doubling road or airport capacity is exponentially more expensive and has substantial right-of-way impacts.

D. BENEFIT-COST ANALYSIS

A qualitative benefit-cost analysis was developed examining the benefits of implementing Heartland Rail recommendations. Benefits derive from the safety improvements that will result from improvements to at-grade crossings, as well as the many benefits of diverting travel from cars to passenger rail. Compared to auto travel, passenger rail is safer, and has lower emissions and energy use. Other benefits discussed in Appendix I include the health benefits of encouraging active transportation (walking, bicycle, scooter), and the money saved by avoiding car trips.

11. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND MANAGEMENT

MORPC staff will oversee the **Right-of-Way Analysis for New, Enhanced Service for Future Rail Corridors, Safety Assessment to Mitigate At-Grade Crossings, and the Rail-Oriented Development Analysis and Governance Framework** project components. MORPC's key personnel supporting Heartland Rail have demonstrated the ability to perform key passenger rail planning activities through the previous Rapid Speed Transformation Initiative (Appendix D) and the ongoing Corridor ID process. Parag Agrawal, AICP, Chief Mobility and Infrastructure Officer and Senior Director of Programming at MORPC, brings over 20 years of experience leading multi-jurisdictional and interagency planning efforts, such as extending the SunRail commuter rail and Brightline high speed rail in Florida. Maria Schaper, AICP, MORPC's Transportation Director, has more than 17 years of experience in urban planning, transportation policy, and infrastructure development, and leads regional transportation planning for MORPC. Liz Webb, Principal Planner at MORPC, holds experience in transit planning and supports MORPC's passenger rail planning efforts, including the Midwest Connect Corridor ID. To augment MORPC's capacity and technical capabilities, consultant support will be engaged to coordinate and deliver the multiple deliverables associated with each project component.

MORPC is partnering with the Convention Center Authority and, if awarded, will sub-award the agency to lead the implementation and management of the **Station Design** project component. The Convention Center Authority's $1.2million local match contribution will support the tasks associated with this component.

As demonstrated above in the section on Technical Merit, the Convention Center Authority has proven its capability to manage design projects. Further, their 2025-2030 capital program provides a clear demonstration of its capability to support, maintain, and invest in major public infrastructure, with approximately $182 million invested across the Convention Center, Hilton Columbus Downtown, and Nationwide Arena. This sustained reinvestment reflects an organizational culture of careful planning, proactive maintenance, and strategic enhancement of major civic assets. Cooperative agreements and contracts will be developed to clarify the roles and responsibilities of MORPC, the Convention Center Authority, and other project partners.

The planning process will proceed quickly upon receipt of notice of award, and remain flexible to allow for unforeseen delays, while meeting federal deadlines to obligate funds. MORPC has assessed risks to the proposed project in this application relative to implementation and has not identified any major risks that could cause delay or otherwise prohibit the obligation of funds prior to the statutory obligation deadline. MORPC will coordinate closely with the FRA and project partners throughout this process.

MORPC has the technical capacity to successfully deliver all components associated with Heartland Rail, and is trusted to manage federal funds in a responsible and timely manner. Some examples of MORPC's administration of federal funds can be found with the formula funding MORPC receives from the Surface Transportation Block Grant, Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality, Transportation Alternatives Program, and the Carbon Reduction Program.

As it has demonstrated in the past, MORPC will be a responsible steward of federal funds awarded through the FSP program, and will work diligently as a partner with the FRA to ensure compliance with all federal requirements during and after the closeout of the award.

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Local Match Commitment Letter

Appendix B: Greater Columbus Passenger Rail Station Study

Appendix C: Ohio 3C Quick Start Passenger Rail Service

Appendix D: MORPC Rapid Speed Transportation Initiative

Appendix E: Letters of Support

- Congresswoman Joyce Beatty
- State Representative Allison Russo
- State Representative Beryl Brown Piccolantonio
- State Representative Brian Lorenz
- State Representative Christine Cockley
- State Representative Crystal Lett
- State Representative Munira Abdullahi
- State Senator Andrew Brenner
- State Senator Beth Liston
- State Senator Hearcel Craig
- City of Columbus
- City of Dublin
- Delaware County
- Franklin County Board of Commissioners
- Franklin County Engineer's Office
- All Aboard Ohio
- Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA)

Appendix F: Ohio Rail Plan

Appendix G: Advancing PA Rail Plan

Appendix H: MORPC 2024-2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan

Appendix I: Benefit-Cost Analysis