

Transport 2020 Commuter Rail: Integration with Charter Street Heating Plant Rail Operations

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The City of Madison, Dane County, and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) comprise an Intergovernmental Partnership – called Transport 2020 – responsible for the planning and development of a proposed future commuter rail service. The Transport 2020 Phase 1 corridor connects the City of Middleton, the University of Wisconsin campus, downtown Madison, and an area located just west of Sun Prairie. The service proposes to use trackage that Wisconsin Southern Railroad currently operates for freight services, including track through the central isthmus corridor and alongside the Charter Street Heating Plant and proposed biomass storage and handling facility.

The commuter rail project is intended to provide multimodal transit connections between residential and employment concentrations throughout the Madison region, improve mobility, and enhance transit access for all area residents and workers. It will also help to promote a compact urban development form along the travel corridor. It includes 17 stations along a 16-mile alignment (see Map below). The service plan has not yet been determined, but there could be frequent service in Madison's core.

Although detailed operating plans are not in place, the highest service scenario would assume service provided between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and midnight (7 days per week). In addition, the highest level of service would be 15-minute peak service (M-F 6:00-9:00 a.m., 4:00-7:00 p.m.) and 30-minute off-peak service (M-F 9:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m.-midnight; Sat/Sun/Hol 6:00 a.m.-midnight). This would necessitate, at a minimum, a single track dedicated solely to commuter rail services. Some operations models have indicated that double track would be required throughout the isthmus (including the Charter Street area), in order to accommodate future freight and passenger rail traffic. However, these details need to be confirmed.

In addition, Transport 2020 plans have identified the Park Street/Kohl Center area as an important area to locate a passenger platform in order to provide access to the Kohl Center and numerous other UW activities. This station facility would also provide a linkage to the Meriter and St. Mary's health care facilities and the Park Street corridor to the south. Accommodation of this platform (specific length to be determined), including a safe and convenient pedestrian facility connecting to Park Street, is very important to the success of the Transport 2020 service.

In order for the commuter rail project to proceed, a regional source of funding must be secured. That source has been identified as an increase in the regional sales tax of 0.5%. The regional sales tax would apply to sales conducted within the boundaries of the Dane County Regional Transit Authority (RTA), which are coterminous with the boundaries of the Madison Area MPO's 25-year planning boundary. Establishment of this funding source requires the passage of a referendum in the affected region, and no referendum is scheduled. If a commuter rail referendum were to pass in Fall 2010, passenger rail operations could commence within 3-4 years of that time, conservatively by 2015.

