



# TACIR

The Tennessee Advisory Commission  
on Intergovernmental Relations



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## MEMORANDUM

TO: Commission Members

FROM: Cliff Lippard   
Executive Director

DATE: 28 June 2023

SUBJECT: Passenger Rail and Mobility—Draft Report for Review and Tentative Approval

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The attached Commission report is submitted for your review and tentative approval. It was prepared in response to Public Chapter 1114, Acts of 2022, and Public Chapter 1124, Acts of 2022, which direct the Commission to study and make recommendations regarding the potential for passenger rail service or other suitable alternatives for linking the major cities in the state's grand divisions. Based on the study directives, the draft focuses on *intercity* passenger rail, which is distinct from *commuter* rail:

- Commuter rail, like other transit-oriented transportation services (e.g., city buses), moves individuals into, out of, and around individual metropolitan areas, often by connecting passengers from suburban areas to urban areas, and primarily runs in conjunction with normal working hours. Tennessee's lone commuter rail is the WeGo Star, which runs from Lebanon to Nashville.<sup>1</sup>
- Intercity passenger rail, in contrast, connects passengers to destinations in different metropolitan areas. It best suits the needs of those traveling medium to long distances as the schedules of these trains often don't align with commuting times and may provide just a few trains per day. The state's lone intercity route, the City of New Orleans Amtrak route, runs from Chicago to New Orleans and stops in Memphis and Newbern, with one train in each direction daily.

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, light rail usually connects passengers to areas within a single city. There is no light rail in Tennessee, although the Memphis Area Transit Authority Trolley operates in a similar fashion in Memphis.

In recent years, other states such as North Carolina, Virginia, and Pennsylvania have successfully initiated new intercity passenger rail services. Through interviews with stakeholders from these states, Commission staff identified several key factors contributing to the successes of intercity passenger rail, which are

- a solid commitment to funding from the state,
- positive working relationships with freight rail companies,
- strong support at the local level, and
- a dedicated state rail office to manage project development.

Based on the experiences of other states and analysis conducted by the Southeast Corridor Commission and the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission, the draft report finds intercity passenger rail service could help increase connectivity and facilitate tourism and other economic development initiatives in Tennessee, thereby supplementing the existing public- and private-sector efforts to address the state's transportation needs. But the state would almost certainly have to subsidize any new passenger rail service through capital investment and ongoing operating cost support. The cost to taxpayers of establishing and operating service on any given rail corridor cannot be known without more detailed engineering and technical analysis than Commission staff can provide. But federal funding that could be used for these types of studies is available through the Federal Railroad Administration's Corridor ID program, which includes \$500,000 grants that can be used for these detailed route studies or other purposes.

**For these reasons, the draft 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:**

- **Tier 1**
  - **Nashville to Chattanooga to Atlanta, GA**
- **Tier 2**
  - **Memphis to Nashville**
  - **Chattanooga to Knoxville to Bristol**
- **Tier 3**
  - **Memphis to Carbondale, IL, to Chicago**
  - **Nashville to Louisville, KY**

**The draft recommends TDOT submit the required supporting data and documentation to the Federal Railroad Administration’s Corridor ID program in support of the joint application already made by local governments for the Nashville to Chattanooga to Atlanta and Memphis to Nashville routes. Additionally, at the next funding opportunity, the draft recommends TDOT submit an application for the Chattanooga to Knoxville to Bristol route and consider submitting applications for the two Tier 3 routes. Further, the draft recommends TDOT collaborate with the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation—as the twin cities of Bristol, Tennessee, and Bristol, Virginia, often do—to identify opportunities to maximize the viability of both the Chattanooga to Bristol corridor and Virginia’s effort to connect Bristol to the Amtrak Northeast Regional passenger rail corridor.**

**And the draft recommends the creation of an office of rail and public transportation within TDOT to develop, implement, and manage any future passenger rail projects in the state, similar to offices created by other states that have successfully implemented passenger rail.**

While passenger rail projects can take decades to implement and require extensive initial and ongoing investment, intercity bus service can be implemented in less time and for less money. And some communities that need transportation options would not be served by potential passenger rail routes. Furthermore, the expansion of intercity bus service in Tennessee has the potential to work in tandem with the Transportation Modernization Act to improve the state’s transportation system in an effort to ensure continued economic growth and the success of the state’s residents and businesses. For example, incentivizing intercity buses to use choice lanes developed under the Transportation Modernization Act by exempting them from fees for using those lanes—as is already the case for city buses and other public transit vehicles—could lower trip times, reduce congestion, and increase intercity mobility.

**As a result, the draft recommends that the state evaluate**

- **establishing intercity bus service along the US-64 corridor connecting Memphis and Nashville via currently unserved communities as recommended by stakeholders in TDOT’s 2021 intercity bus needs assessment;**
- **increasing intercity bus service along the I-40 and I-81 corridor connecting Memphis, Nashville, Knoxville, and Bristol; and**
- **opportunities for intercity bus service to support the goals of the Transportation Modernization Act.**