

NORTHWOODS RAIL TRANSIT COMMISSION

MEETING SUMMARY

GLTPA - Rhinelander

September 18, 2026

1./2. Call to Order / Roll Call - Introductions and Public Comment

The meeting was called to order at approximately 10 am by Vice Chair Peter Kaz. Those in attendance included the following: COMMISSIONERS – Peter Kaz Clark County EDC, Jeff Ratcliffe Houghton County/KEDA, Tom Buelteman Marinette County Board, Kelly Coyle Marathon County Board, Jerome Krempasky Clark County Board, Wendel Johnson Marinette County, Kyle Kilbourn Oneida County Board, Jeff Ulrich Price County Board, and Larry Johnson Menominee County Board. OTHERS: Brad Peot Watco, Shawn Brantmeier WI Paper Council, Matt Pleshek City of Shawano, Jerald Wuorenmaa WUPPDR, John Varda LSSA-WCG, Sarah Simonson WisDOT Freight Rail Program Manager, Lisa Stern WisDOT Rail, Jim Schmidt Dairyland Rail, Rick Bliese, Robert Pittman, Libby Ogard Prime Focus LLC, Henry Schienebeck GLTPA, Sheila Nyberg Clark County EDC and Darryl Landeau NCWRPC.

Public Comment: John Varda addressed the group beginning with a brief overview of providing some assistance to the NRTC in support of this LSSA/WCG mission. He went on to say he was disappointed that the RIA accelerator grant may be lost, and was concerned that the NRTC to provide support at the level needed, and also that WisDOT determined it could not support the administration of the project. His view is that the NRTC needs to step up as the applicant and close on delivery of the project.

Editor's Note: The NRTC Executive Committee has been working closely with the private consultant, Libby Ogard, since she first brought the proposal to the Commission. Since making the award, US DOT has determined that NRTC lacks the administrative and financial capacity to manage the award. They also stated that using a line-of-credit to cover expenses prior to reimbursement was not acceptable practice. An entity with the financial capacity to handle the award is needed to accept transfer of the grant with the role of the NRTC to be determined. We have been working with US DOT on accepting potential transfer candidates.

Sheila Nyberg noted that although Clark County is new the Commission, she feels the organization can come together to do more for rail in this area.

3. Approval of NRTC Meeting Notes from July 11, 2025 and April 24, 2026

On a motion by Kilbourn, seconded by Buelteman, the meeting notes from July 11, 2025 and April 24, 2026 were approved with all in favor.

9. Discussion/Action on Regional Infrastructure Accelerator (RIA) Grant

The Chair moved up Agenda Item 9.

Libby Ogard with Prime Focus LLC provided an update on her proposed Regional Infrastructure Accelerator (RIA) project. The NRTC agreed to sponsor the application for grant funding through US DOT. The RIA would provide technical assistance to entities seeking financing for rail projects primarily through RRIF and FIFIA loans.

A grant of \$1.15 million was awarded to support a technical assistance center for a five state area. However, NRTC does not have the administrative or financial capacity to manage the award. Funds are distributed on a reimbursement of expenses basis. So, efforts are underway to find an eligible entity to transfer the award. WisDOT and the other four state DOT's declined to accept along with multiple RPCs, MPOs, the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact and others. Currently, the State of Indiana Office of the Treasurer is interested in the transfer. Another call is being scheduled before the end of September to continue discussing. Transfer issues include: the multistate jurisdiction, the reimbursement provisions, scope of work, and NRTC role.

There was some general discussion with recognition of the opportunity presented and the challenges faced. Ratcliffe identified the primary challenge as the money, noting US DOT was clear that borrowing was not an option.

On a motion by Ratcliffe, seconded by Krempasky, the NRTC approved the transfer of the RIA award to any eligible recipient before the end of the year, with all in favor.

7. Wisconsin State Freight Plan Update

Agenda Item 7 was moved up to accommodate speaker's schedule.

Matt Umhoefer, WisDOT Economic Development Section Chief presented on the 2027 Wisconsin State Freight Plan currently under development. Completion of the plan opens access to federal freight funding.

The Freight Plan provides a vision and goals for Wisconsin's freight program and positions Wisconsin to remain competitive in the global marketplace and to enhance safety, security, and resiliency; to ensure system preservation and enhancement; to enhance system mobility, operations, reliability, efficiency, and connectivity. The Plan reflects, considers, and addresses freight needs across all modes. It looks ahead to the future of freight in Wisconsin and the needs of the state, and it links to WisDOT's long-range multimodal plan Connect 2050. The draft plan is about to be release for public comment this fall, and WisDOT hopes to have US DOT review and approval completed by June of 2027.

4. Election of Officers

Landeau reported that previous Chair, Dale Kupczyk, transitioned to full retirement and resigned as Chair. Other current officers include Peter Kaz, Vice Chair; Tom Buelteman, Secretary and Jeff Ratcliffe, Treasurer.

Ratcliffe nominated Vice Chair Peter Kaz, Clark County for NRTC Chairperson. No other nominations. Moved to close nominations and cast a unanimous ballot for Kaz. Motion passed with all in favor.

Kaz nominated Treasurer Jeff Ratcliffe, Houghton County for NRTC Vice Chairperson. No other nominations. Moved to close nominations and cast a unanimous ballot for Ratcliffe. Motion passed with all in favor.

Kaz nominated Secretary Tom Buelteman, Marinette County for NRTC Secretary. No other nominations. Moved to close nominations and cast a unanimous ballot for Buelteman. Motion passed with all in favor.

Kaz nominated Jerome Krempasky, Clark County for NRTC Treasurer. No other nominations. Moved to close nominations and cast a unanimous ballot for Krempasky. Motion passed with all in favor.

Landeau noted that the bylaws indicate that each officer should represent a different county. There was some discussion. Landeau indicated that we follow the bylaws loosely.

On a motion by Buelteman, seconded by Johnson, an exception to the bylaws was deemed acceptable in this case. Motion passed with all in favor.

5. Discussion/Approval of 2027 Budget

Landeau reported that the proposed expenses for 2027 include an increase in the administrative services fee due to increasing costs. Administrative services to maintain operations for the rail commission include organizing meetings, preparing agendas and minutes, webpage maintenance, banking, responding to inquiries, and miscellaneous functions.

The budget also includes set asides for potential miscellaneous expenses and for reserve to ensure maintenance of operations in case of reduction in membership as has happened in the past. On the revenue side, county membership dues continue at the original \$500 per county (11) for Wisconsin and \$400 per county (7) for Michigan. Landeau noted that Dickinson County, Michigan

On a motion by Kilbourn, seconded by Buelteman, the NRTC Administrative Budget for 2027 was approved as presented with all in favor.

6. Discussion/Action on Resolution of Support for Amtrak Extension: Milwaukee-Green Bay.

Johnson presented on his proposed resolution in support of the planned extension of the Amtrak Hiawatha from Milwaukee to Green Bay.

On a motion by Bueltman, seconded by Kilbourn, NRTC Resolution 2026-1 In support of the planned extension of the Amtrak Hiawatha from Milwaukee to Green Bay, WI was approved as presented with all in favor.

8. WisDOT Freight Rail Program Update

Sarah Simonson, WisDOT's Freight Rail Program Manager gave a brief update due to time. Contracts are ready to begin work on rail bridges in Wausau and Tomahawk. The Wisconsin rail plan update is on a similar timeline as the freight plan. The FRPP (Freight Rail Preservation Program) was not funded in the last budget, but some left over money was used last year. No money was available this year, but DOT is hopeful the program will get funding put back into the program in the next budget.

10. Next Meeting Date/Potential Topics

Next meeting is anticipated in Spring of next year, unless an item of business needs to be addressed before then. One topic for Spring will be an introduction to WEDC's programs including their new rail tax credits.

Ogard asked about addressing other grant opportunities in light of not knowing when the next Commission meeting will be. There was wide ranging discussion. Landeau stated that if the project proposals were viable local projects, shouldn't the benefiting jurisdiction take responsibility by sponsoring the grant?

Kilbourn made a motion to empower the Executive Committee to explore pursuing appropriate rail grant opportunities on behalf of the NRTC. Seconded by Johnson. All in favor.

Editor's Note: It seems that most federal and state grant assistance programs (at least in the transportation realm) operate on a reimbursement basis. So, NRTC's lack of capital would continue to be a barrier to grant sponsorship.

11. Adjourn

Chair Kaz adjourned the meeting at approximately 12:10 pm.