High Speed Rail Alliance

BUILDING THE PASSENGER RAIL COALITION

2026 HSRA Annual Conference

November 13, 2026

Opening Remarks

Jordan Pokorney
Manager of Outreach & Engagement
High Speed Rail Alliance

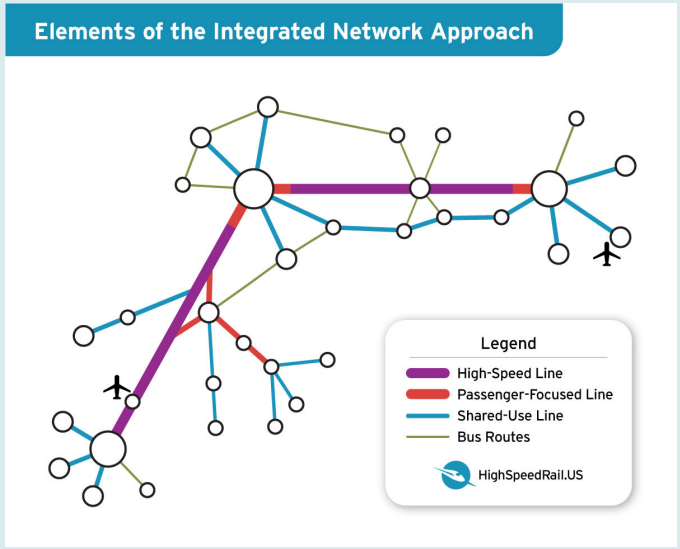
Who Are We?

About HSRA

- Member-supported 501(c)(3) working to connect North America with fast, frequent, and affordable trains
- Empowering grassroots advocates nationwide
- Raising standards and thinking big since 1993

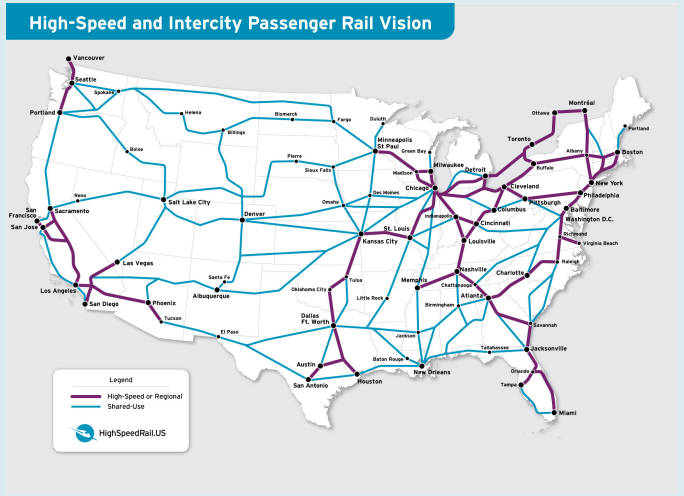
Integrated Network Approach

Big-picture, service-led planning



Federal Railway Program

A bottom-up movement for top-down planning





800+ New Coaches

Credit: Amtrak



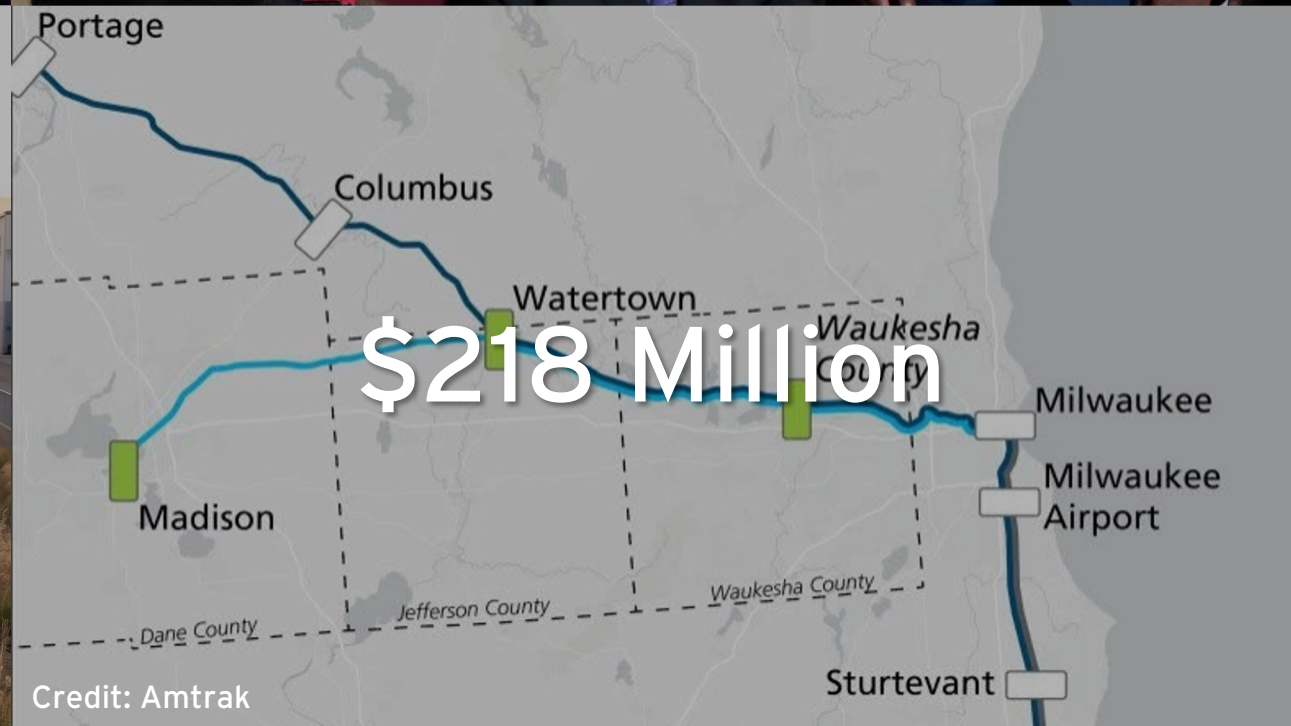
Commission Extended

NITA Act Signing, Dec. 16, 2025



85% Measures Passed

Credit: Front Range Passenger Rail District



$218 Million

Credit: Amtrak

High Speed Rail Alliance

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Keynote:
Standing Up for Passenger Rail in Illinois

State Representative Rita Mayfield
Illinois District 60

High Speed Rail Alliance

Passenger Rail Planning Act: Proposed Frequencies

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- Milwaukee: At least hourly, with service every two hours to Green Bay.
- Madison, Wisconsin, and St. Paul, Minnesota: At least hourly.
- Rockford: At least hourly, with service every four hours to East Dubuque.
- East St. Louis, St. Louis, and Kansas City: At least hourly.
- Champaign: At least hourly, with service every four hours to Carbondale and Memphis.
- Indianapolis, Louisville, Nashville, and Atlanta: At least hourly.
- Indianapolis and Cincinnati: At least hourly.
- Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Columbus, Ohio: At least hourly.
- Cleveland: At least hourly.
- Detroit and Toronto: At least hourly.
- Moline: Every two hours, with service every four hours to Des Moines, Omaha, and Denver.
- Peoria: Every two hours.
- Galesburg, Quincy, and Hannibal, Missouri: Every four hours.

Northern Illinois Transit Authority (NITA) Board

- Five appointed by Governor JB Pritzker.
- Five appointed by Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson.
- Five appointed by Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle.
- One appointed by each of the following county boards: DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will.

High Speed Rail Alliance Update: Looking Ahead to 2027

Rick Harnish
Executive Director
High Speed Rail Alliance

Panel:
The NITA Story: Transforming Transit Through a Diverse Coalition

Claire T. McNorton
Illinois State Lead
Climate Cabinet

Lena Guerrero Reynolds
Policy Advocate
Environmental Law & Policy Center

Audrey Wennink
Senior Director
Metropolitan Planning Council

High Speed Rail Alliance

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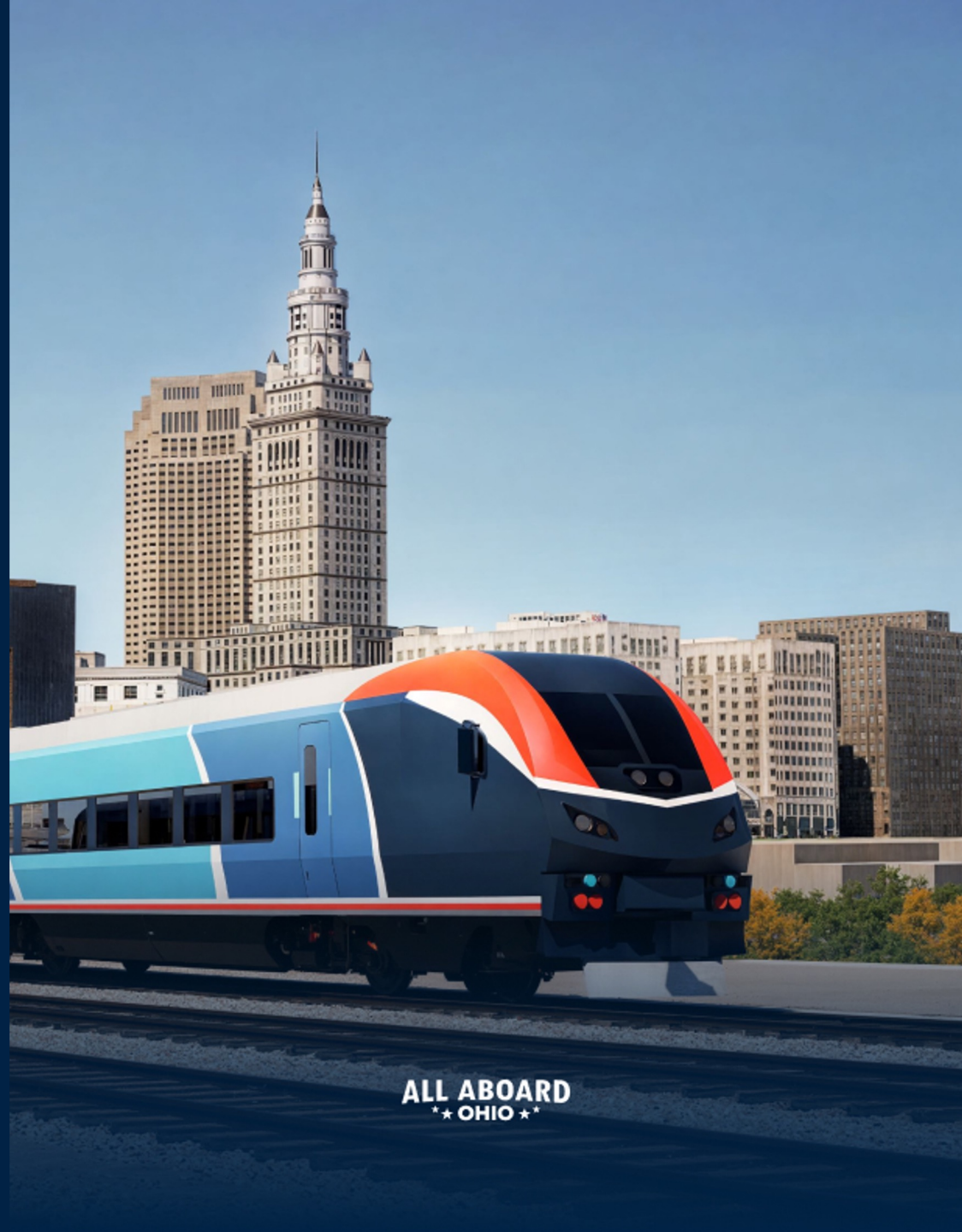
ALL ABOARD OHIO

Plug & Play Advocacy

Ohio's Toolkit for a Scalable Statewide Rail Movement



ALL ABOARD OHIO

Mitch Radakovich

Board Chair, All Aboard Ohio





Agenda

- Field Trip to Ohio
- All Aboard Ohio
- Growing Pains and How We Cure Them
- AAO Theory of Organizing
- Rinse & Repeat

ALL ABOARD OHIO



Cleveland RTA New Trainsets

Founded in 1973, All Aboard Ohio has been advocating for passenger rail for over 50 years.

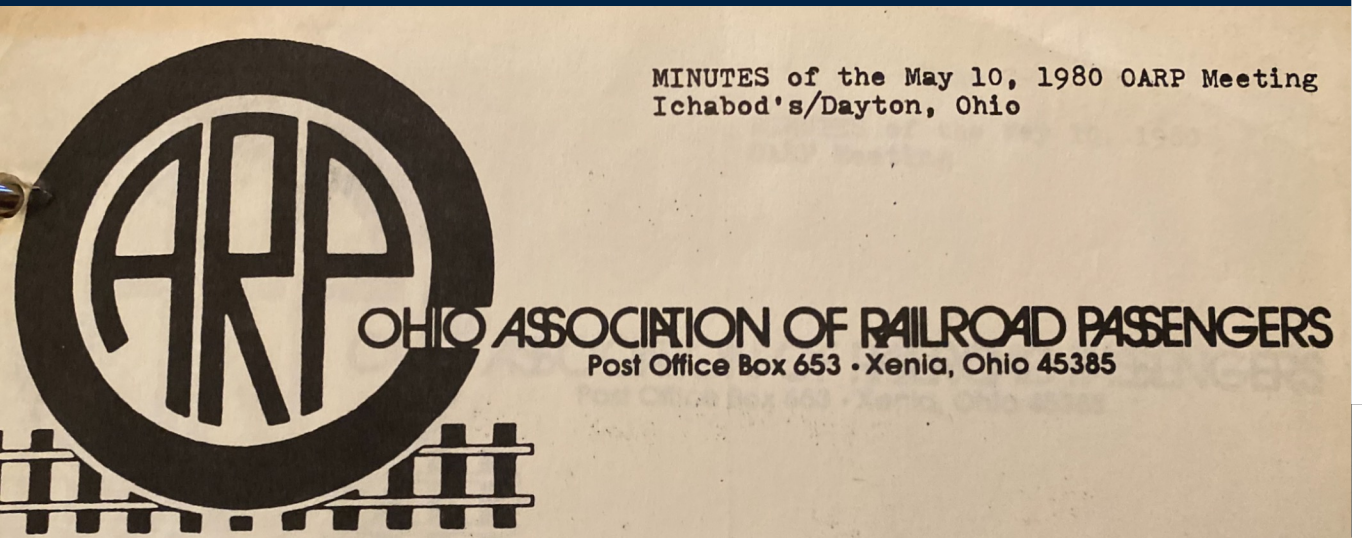
We exist to advocate for the establishment, improvement, and maintenance of a robust transportation system focusing on passenger rail.

ALL ABOARD OHIO

History

Founded in 1973 in Xenia, Ohio - Picking up the pieces of passenger rail's golden age.

The organization focused on advocacy and camaraderie





allaboardohio.org/vintage

Passenger Rail in Ohio

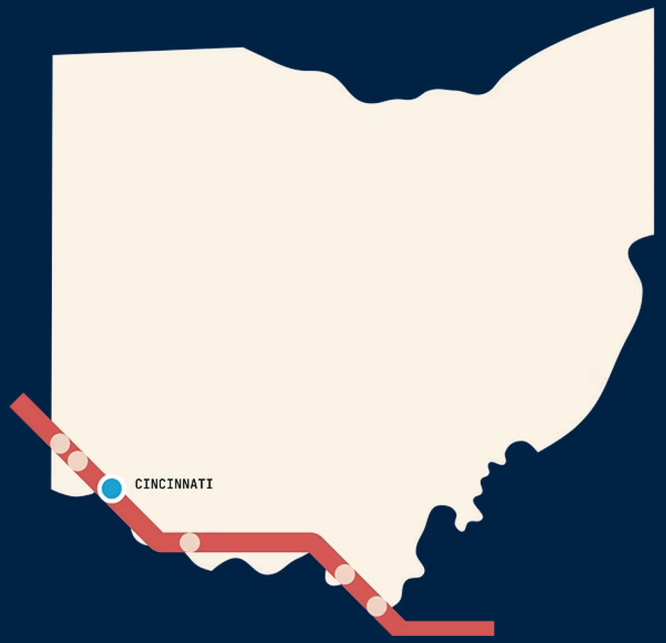
Trains in the dark of night

ALL ABOARD OHIO





Current Ohio Routes



Cardinal
3 Days per Week
Cincinnati: 1a/3a



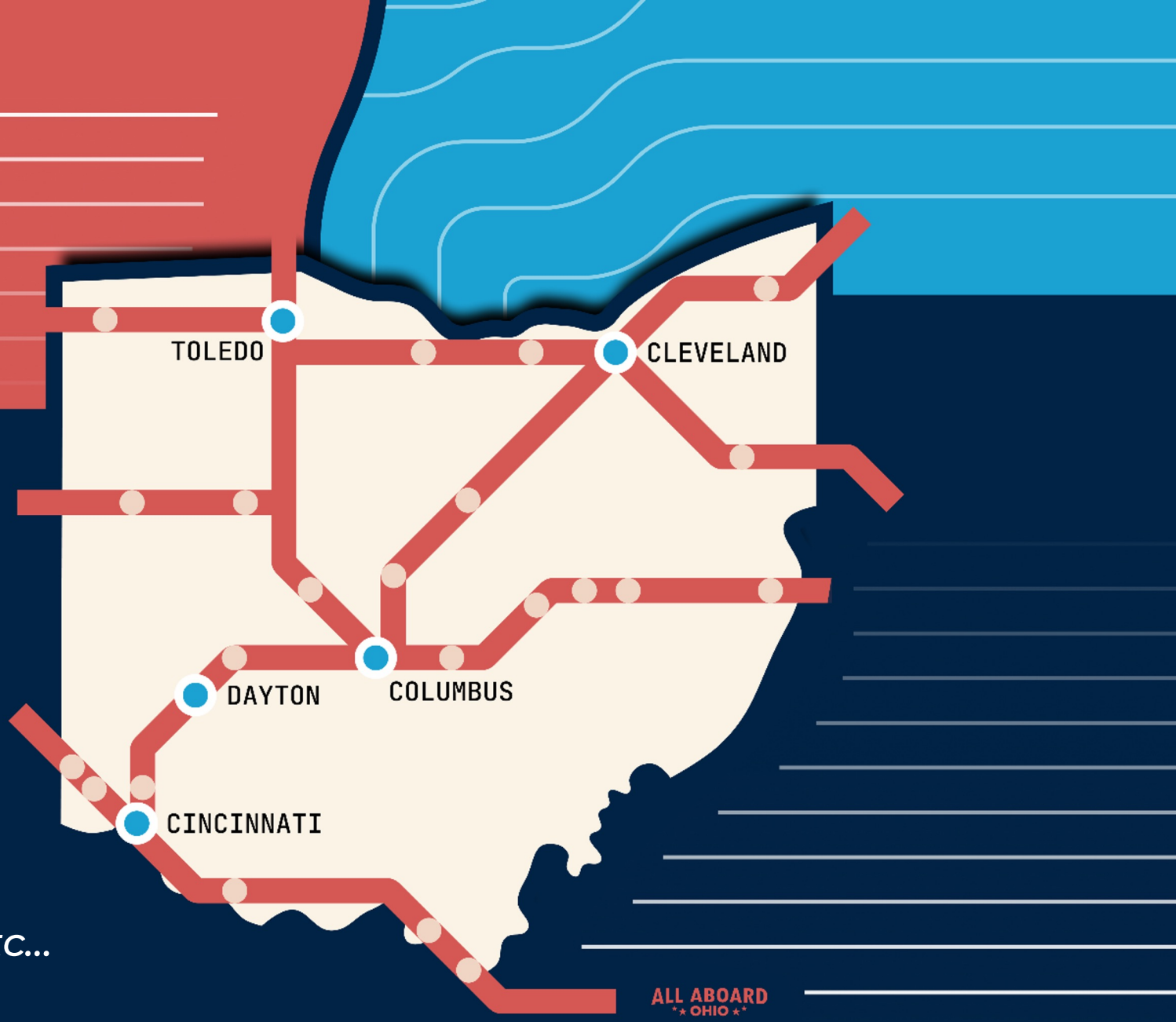
Lake Shore Limited
Cleveland: 6a/3a
Toledo: 3a/6a



Floridian
Cleveland: 2a/3a
Toledo: 12a/5a

Renaissance

- *Corridor ID*
- *Long Distance Proposals*
- *Daily Cardinal*
- *Lake Shore Limited*
- *Extended Pennsylvanian*
- *Local Transit: New Levies, BRT, etc...*



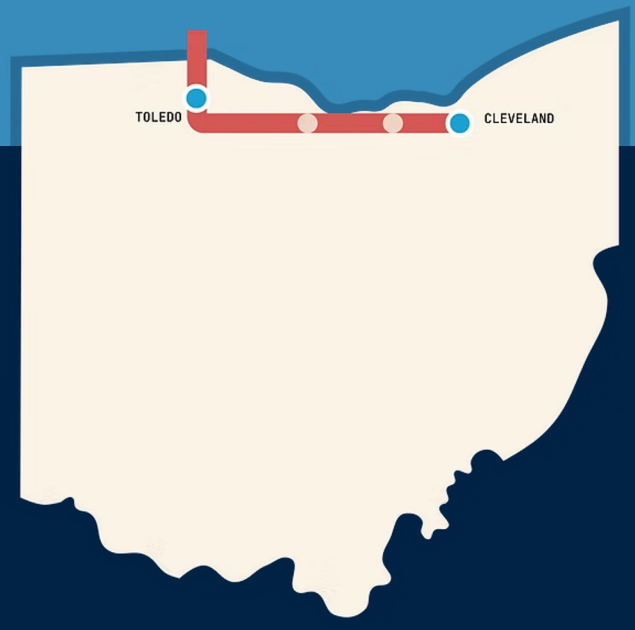
Ohio's Proposed Routes

ALL ABOARD OHIO

New routes being studied via the federal government's Corridor ID program.
Find out more at allaboardohio.org/routes



3C+D



Cleveland-Toledo-Detroit



Midwest Connect
(Chicago - Pittsburgh)

Successes

8,000+
members, up from 200 · 8 chapters

200+
attendees at our first Ohio Rail Summit + 6 TV stations

10.2M
social media impressions in the past year

41
earned media stories in the past year

Statehouse
Moved SB 449 to bring Ohio back into MIPRC, co-led by leadership in both parties

Coalition
Statewide coalition of cities, MPOs and businesses convened by MORPC and NOACA

Fundraising
Rebuilt our recurring giving program and the technology behind it

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The “State” of Ohio

- 1 Governor. 33 Senators. 99 Reps.
- Biennial Budgets – Spring 2027!
- ODOT
- ORDC

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New Opportunities

- Governor-Elect Amy Acton
- Broken Supermajority
  - Desire for bipartisanship
- New ORDC Director
- New ODOT Director
- New ORDC Commission Seats (3)

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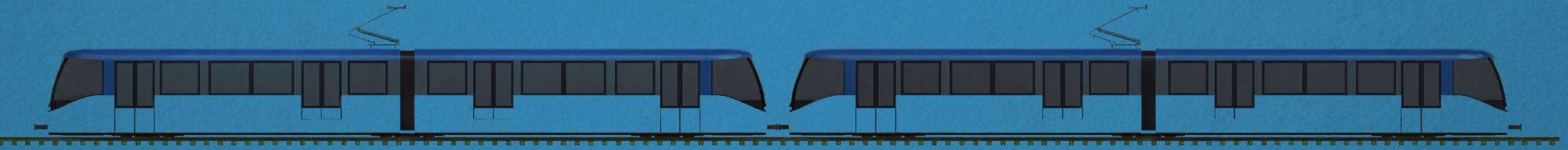
OHIO



New Opportunities!

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New Opportunities!

But what is our focus?



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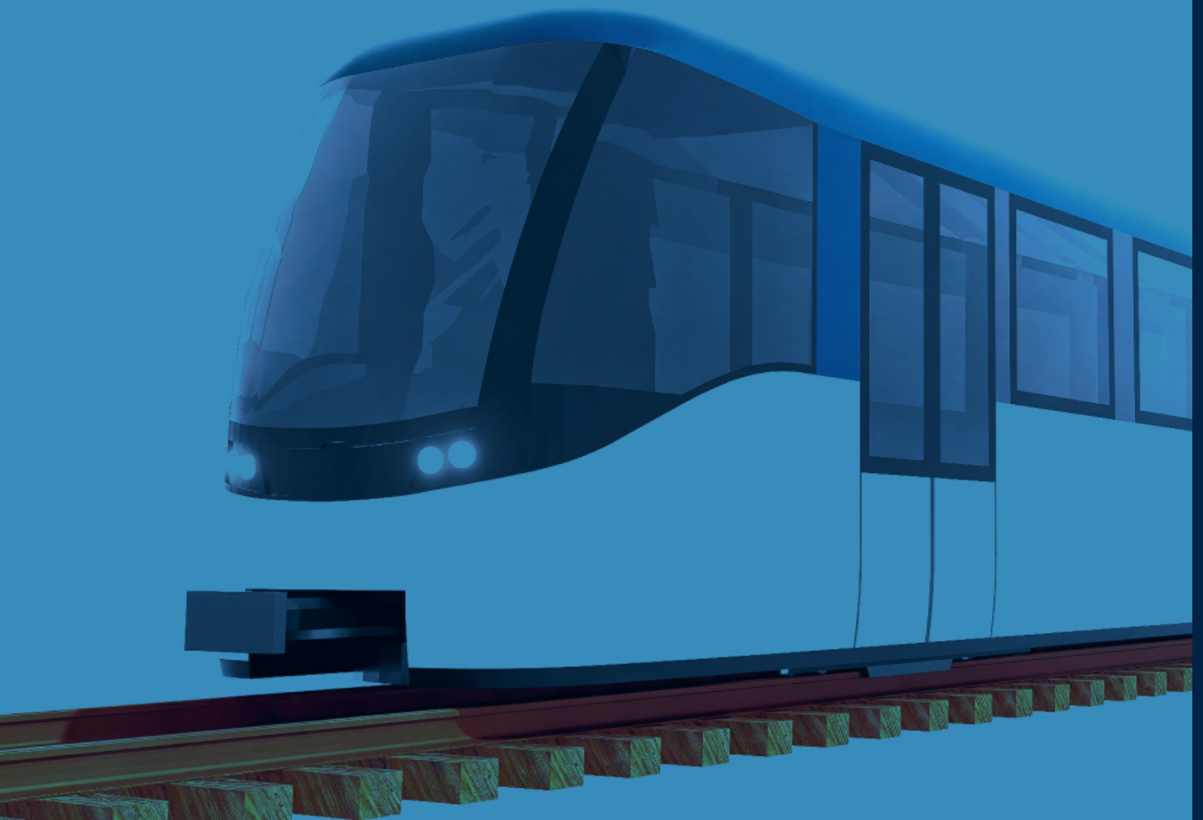

Mission Statement

All Aboard Ohio advocates for the establishment, improvement, and maintenance of a robust transportation system, including expanded choices, enhanced mobility, and increased access.

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Cleveland RTA New Trainsets

Organizational Values

- Improved Transportation Choices for All
- Statewide Collaboration
- Community Empowerment
- Catalysts for Change

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@allaboardohio on Instagram

Chief Strategy

AAO will bring together stakeholders and influential coalitions to take advantage of the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that presents itself via the Corridor ID program funding.

AAO will act as a liaison in assisting the coalition achieve the vision by uniting leadership to navigate the Corridor ID program.

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Prioritizing

- As a board…
- Evaluating capacity (hours, $$)
- What is critical to org success?
- What is critical for strategy success?

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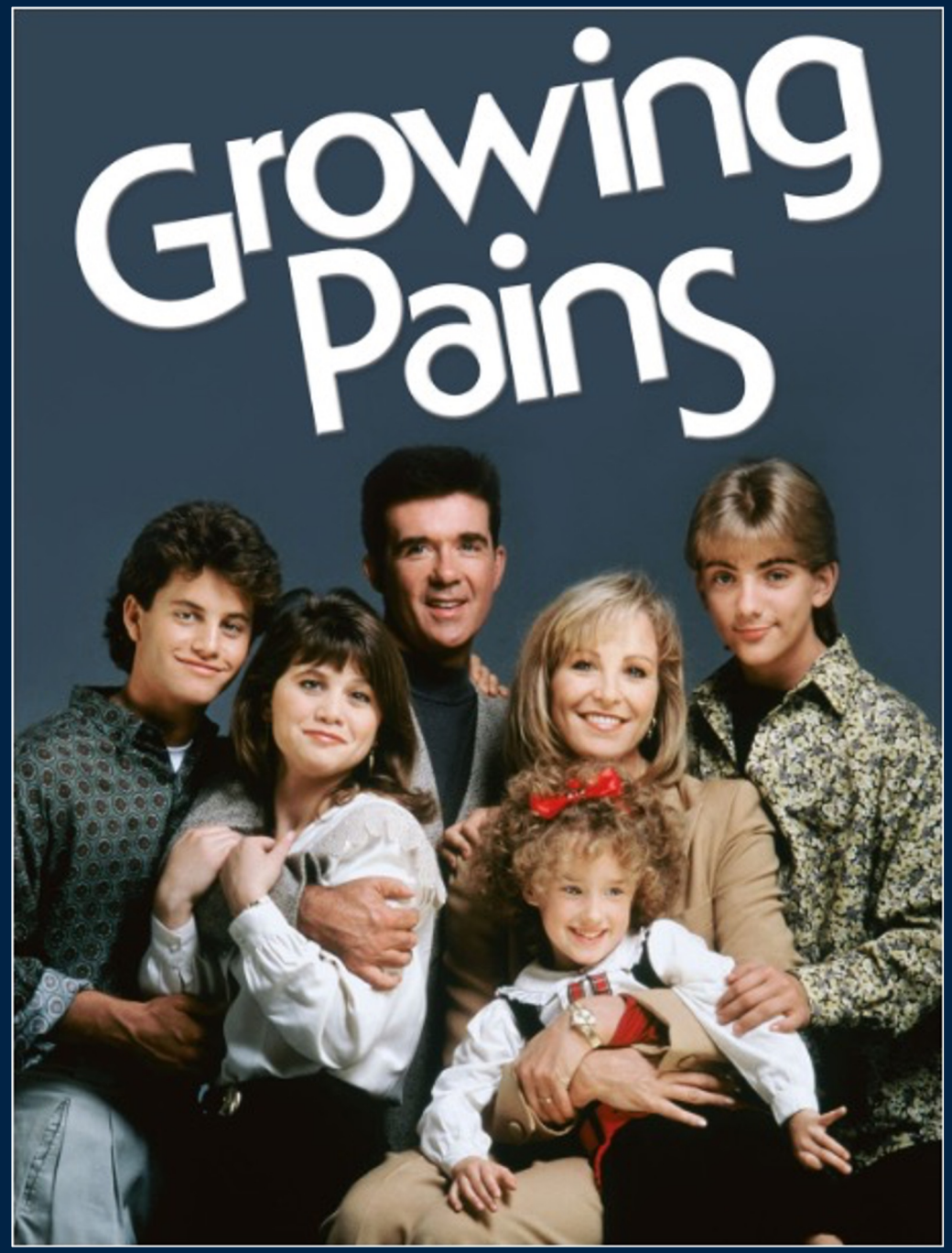
What is not working?

- “Startup Mentality”
- Rapid unsustainable growth
- Quick solutions for immediate problems
- Communication gaps



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What are the jobs to be done?



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What are the jobs to be done?

- Mapping every job in both sections
- YES... fancy advocacy
- ALSO: Fundraising, Technology, Membership processing...
- Input from board, volunteers AND members



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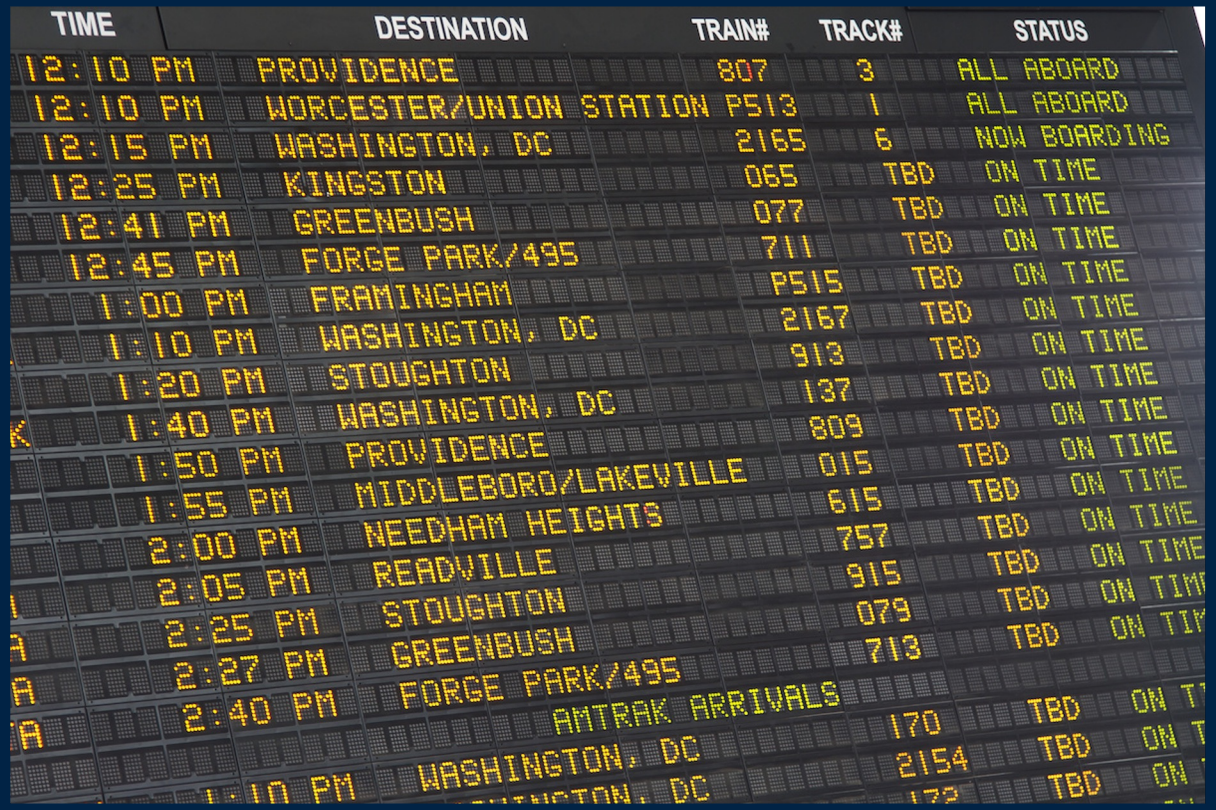

Organization Design

- How do the jobs fit together?
- Finding efficiencies
- Crisp responsibility cutoffs
- Inspired by corporate...

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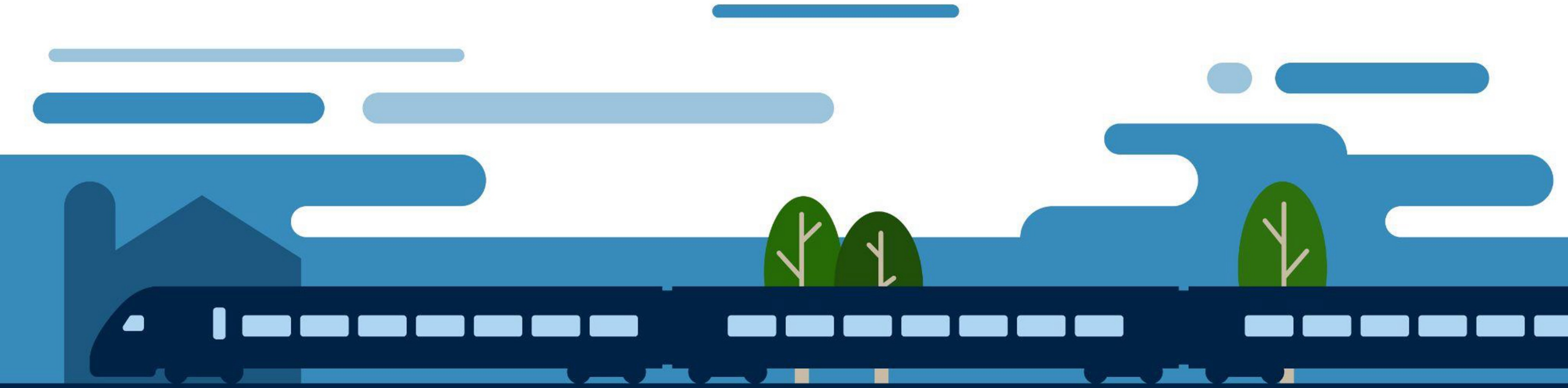
ALL ABOARD OHIO



FOR A CONNECTED MIDWEST

All Aboard Ohio's Theory of Organization

Our "Products":

- Public Engagement
- Government Relations
- Business & Coalition Partnerships
- Membership
- Signature Events



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Public Engagement

- Changing the status quo
- Making sure Ohioans know what is possible
- Educating influential community members
- Finding future AAO members
- Media Relations





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Government Relations

- Educating statehouse and executive leaders
- Building partnerships with city halls
- Vocal reminders to the bureaucracy ☺️
- Empowering the public to be civically engaged







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Business & Coalition Partnerships

- Building relationships with businesses, advocacy partners, and other powerful entities
- 2 major benefits…
  - Political (of course)
  - Financial



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All Aboard Ohio's Advocacy Partners





























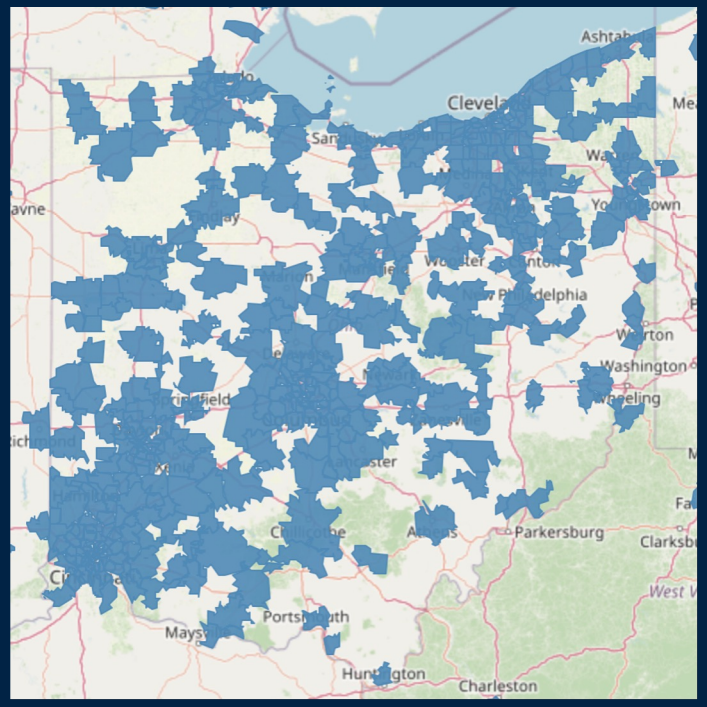


The Ability Center

Membership

- After all, we are the Ohio ~ASSOCIATION OF RAIL PASSENGERS~
- Building up our people
- Volunteer and engagement opportunities
- Member development pipeline





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Chapters

Chapters across Ohio:

- Athens
- Cincinnati
- Cleveland
- Columbus
- Dayton
- Ohio State University
- University of Cincinnati
- Toledo
- Miami University

Core to grassroots activism

Front line for engaging public



Signature Events

- All 4 other products in one...





Let’s not forget…

What wasn’t working?



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What is not working?

- “Startup Mentality”
- Rapid unsustainable growth
- Quick solutions for immediate problems
- Communication gaps
- **We need a plan to OPERATE!**



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Organizational Support

- Less “Sexy”
- Yet… just as important
- What tools are required for our outreach products to thrive?



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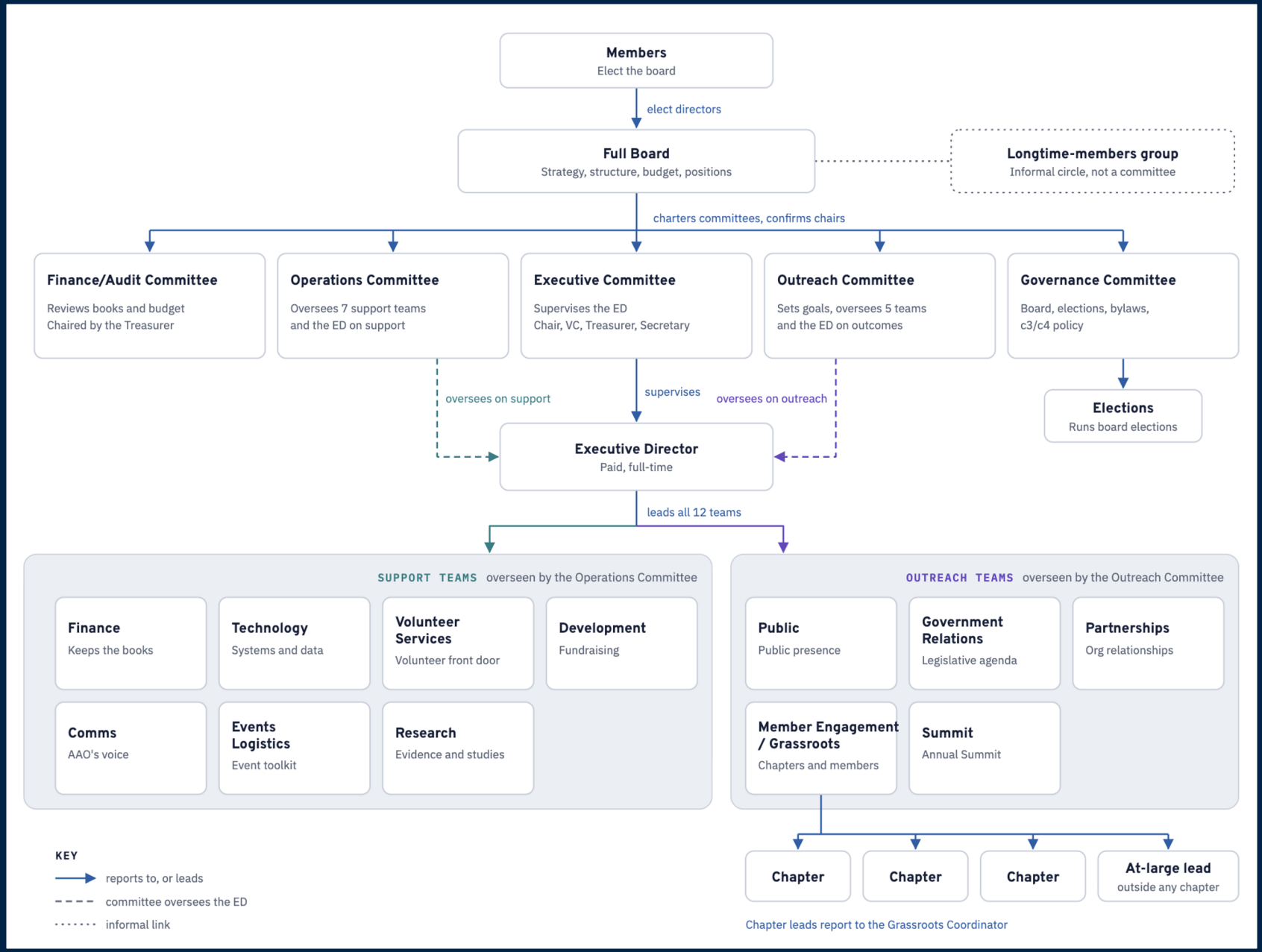
Putting it All Together



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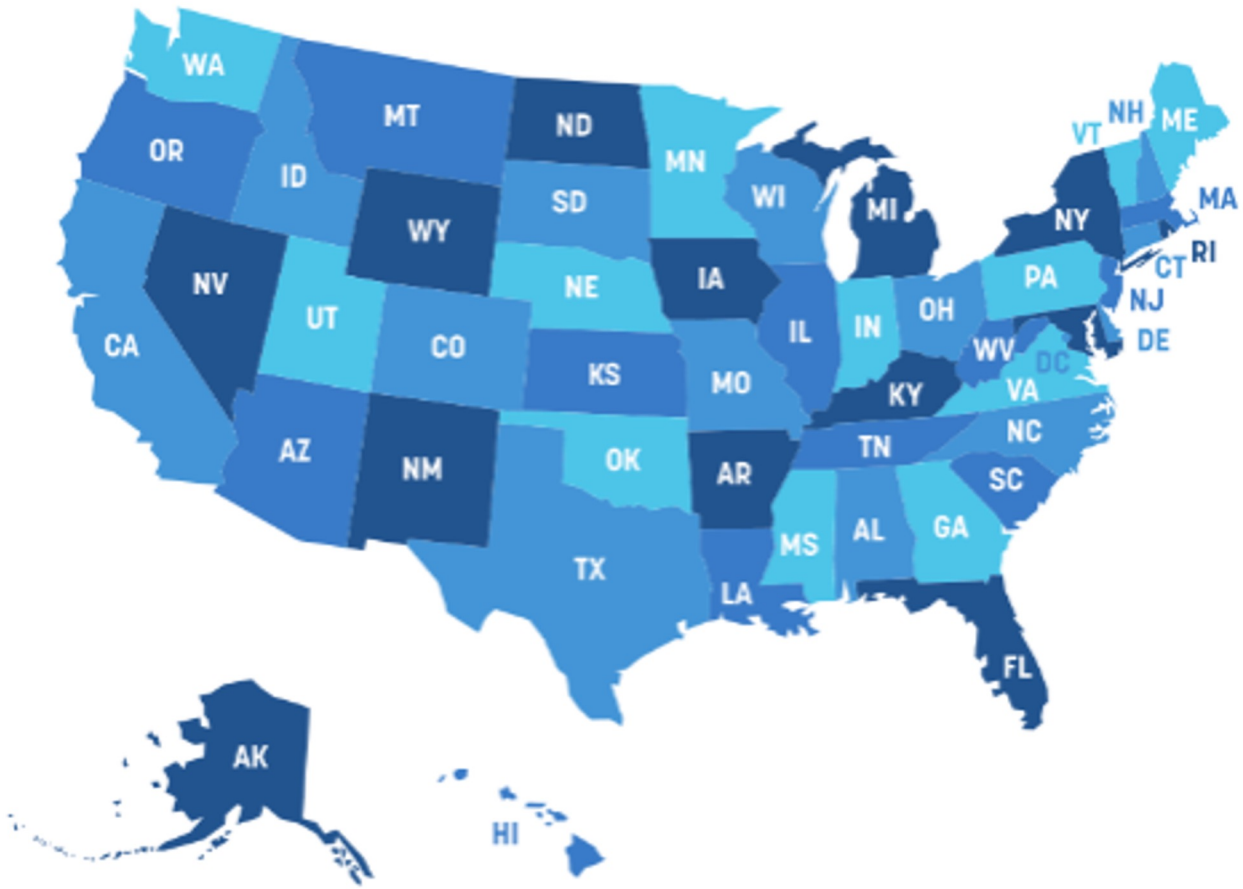
Great... It works in Ohio...

There are 49 other states



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Advocacy Across America

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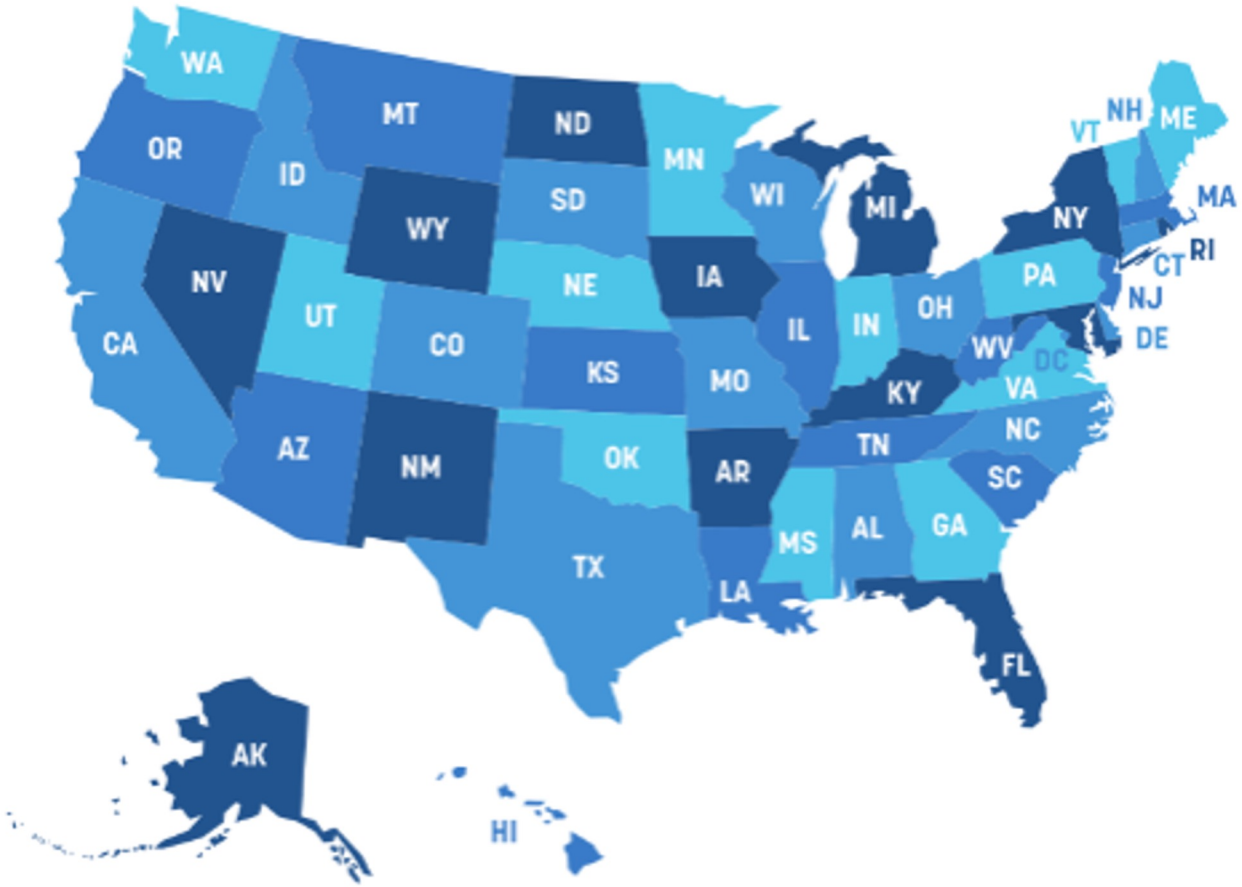


All Across America

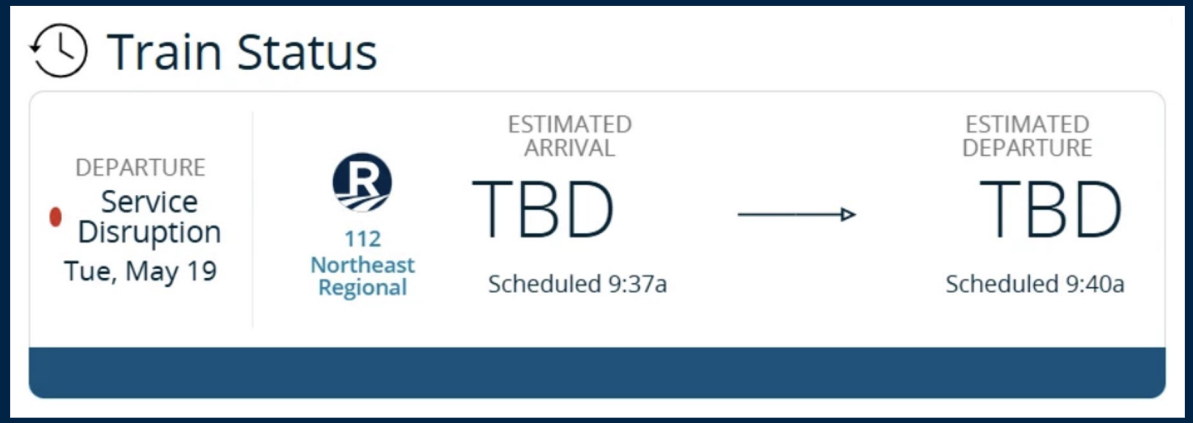
We believe every state can have the same successes as Ohio

- Passionate people offering time
- Strategy at the core
- Work smarter not harder
- Every type of person

*Nothing in the plan was specific to Ohio!

The Key Questions

- How can we reduce growing pains?
- How can we attract young energy?
- How can we break the stigma of “rail/transit nerds”?
- How can we build a broad coalition?
- How can we convince historic adversaries?
- How can we operate with excellence, even with little to no staff?



The Answers

- Focus on organization
- Strategic Planning – don't stretch too thin
- Stick to your mission
- Find the talents in everybody
- Learn from your neighbors

AND…









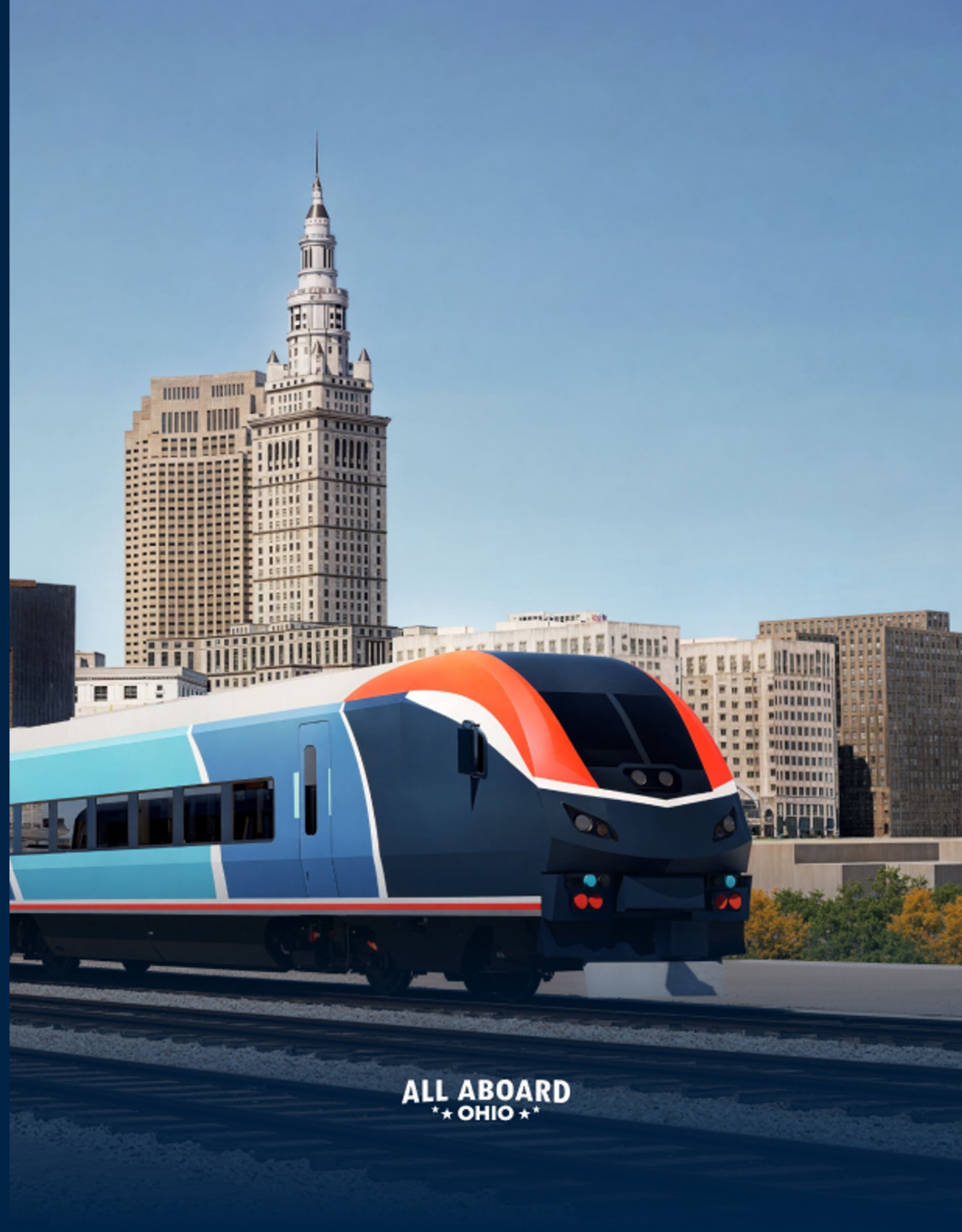
Introducing: Statehouse Rail Network Starter Kit

- Identifying key tasks to get your state organization growing
- Playbooks addressing typical startup topics
- Toolbox of templates and setups
    - Out of the box WIX design
    - Strategic Planning Guide
    - Chapter Startup Guide
    - Board Member Matrix
    - Fundraising How-Tos
    - Communications 101
- Working as a cohort, growing together

How You Can Help

- Get involved in the Statehouse Rail Network
- Reach out about growing in your state!

mitch@allaboardohio.org

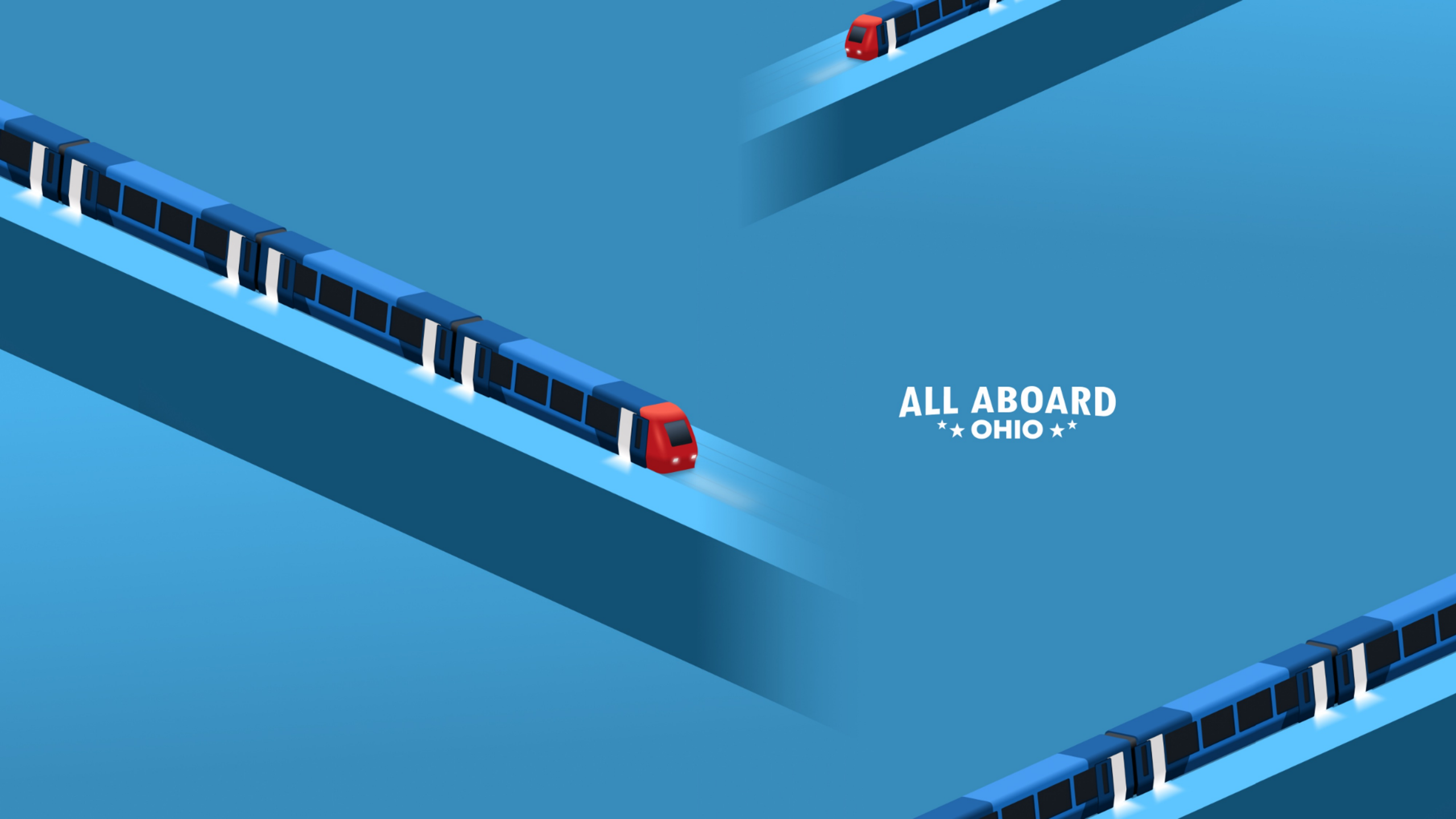


How You Can Help

AND...

- Visit *allaboardohio.org*
- Donate at *allaboardohio.org/donate*
- Sign our supporters list
- Join our slack
- Follow our social media

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OHIO

A Word From the Québec Government Office in Chicago

Jean-François Hould
Québec's Chief Representative to the Midwest

Sean Corrie
Trade Officer – Transportation
Board Member, High Speed Rail Alliance

HSRA ANNUAL CONFERENCE · NOVEMBER 13, 2026 · CHICAGO

What Actually Moves the Needle

The environmental solution hiding in "train" sight

Matthew X. Roling
Clinical Assistant Professor, Kellogg School of Management
Board Treasurer, High Speed Rail Alliance

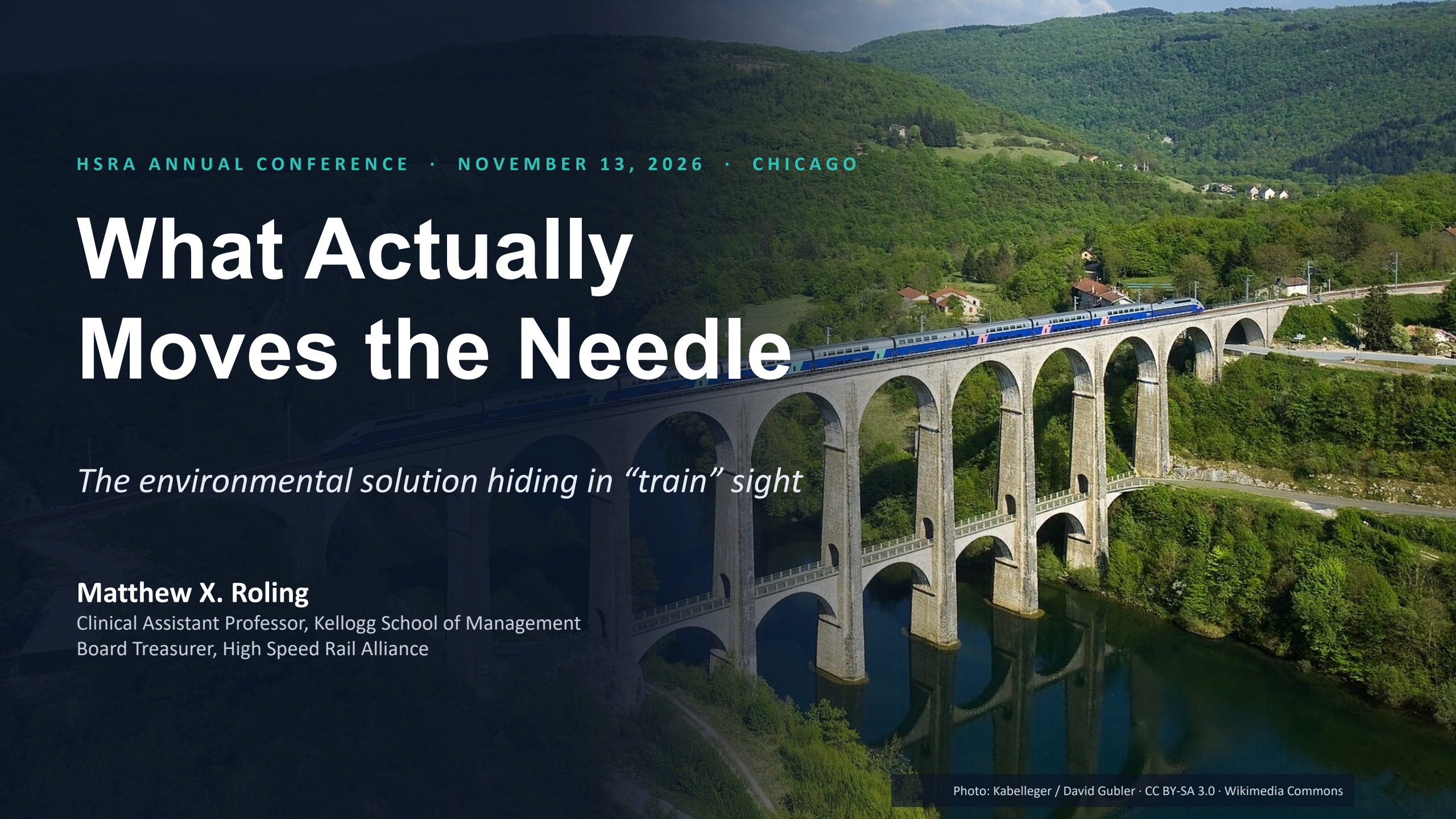


Photo: Kabelleger / David Gubler · CC BY-SA 3.0 · Wikimedia Commons

THE HOOK

My Great Uncle Adam the Engineer

1,015 mi

Denver → Chicago, nonstop

13 h 5 m

dawn-to-dusk run time

112.5 mph

top speed on one section

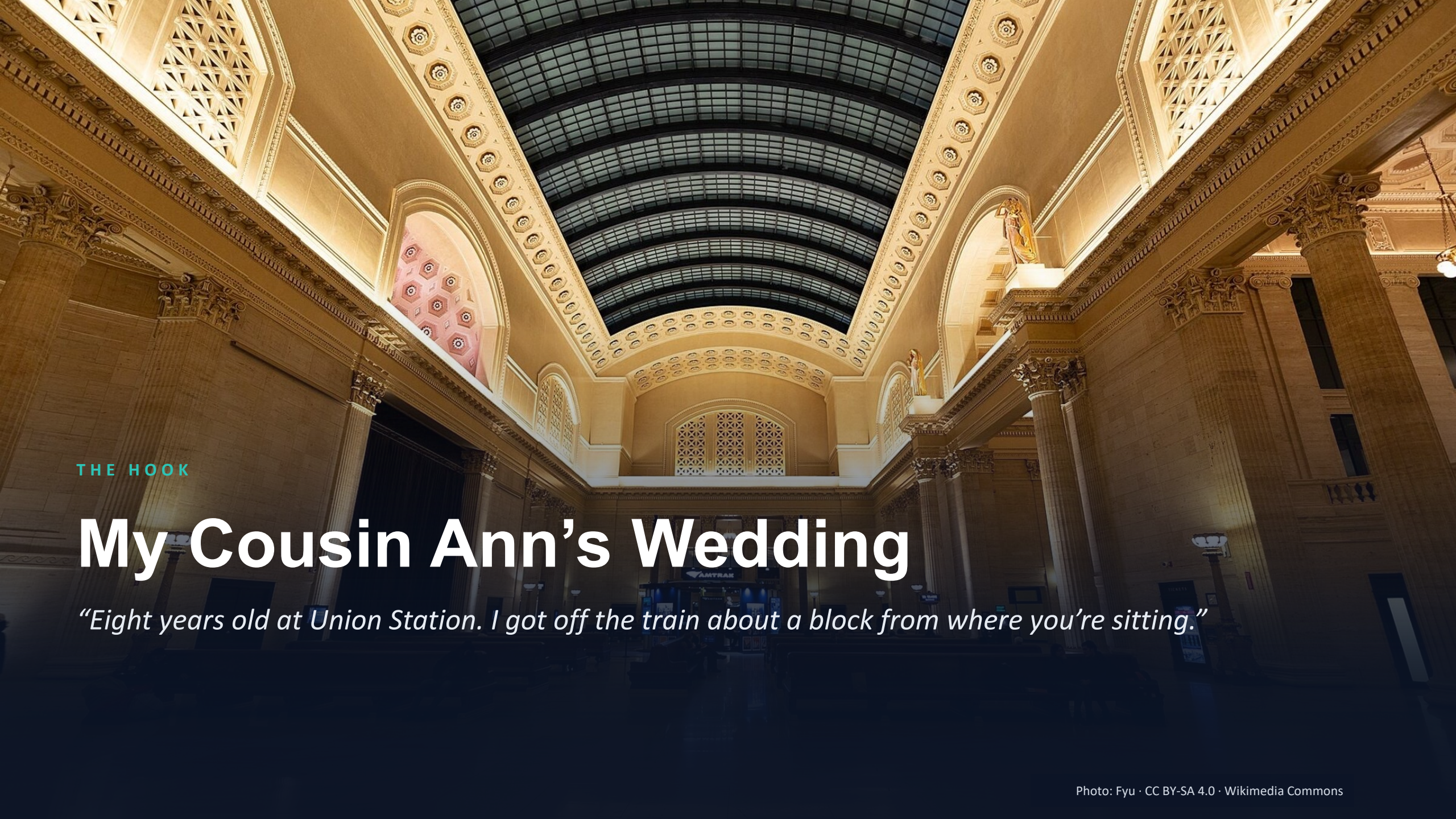
May 26, 1934

rolled into the Century of Progress World's Fair

Retired in 1960. Still on display at the Museum of Science and Industry.



Photo: Warren LeMay · CC BY-SA 2.0 · Wikimedia Commons



THE HOOK

My Cousin Ann’s Wedding

“Eight years old at Union Station. I got off the train about a block from where you’re sitting.”

Photo: Fyu · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

The Future in 1934



Then: coal smoke was the price of moving



BURLINGTON ZEPHYR AT A CENTURY OF PROGRESS EXPOSITION — 1934
Built of stainless steel — Electric shot welded — Rides on articulated trucks. Powered by an eight-cylinder, two-cycle, 660 horse-power, oil-burning Diesel engine. Runs on roller-bearings — Air-conditioned—Equipped for radio reception.

1934: the first diesel, stainless-steel streamliner

Every generation gets to pick its future.

Left: Jack Delano, Chicago Union Station, 1943 (public domain). Right: Pioneer Zephyr at the Century of Progress, 1934 (Public domain).

TODAY'S ROUTE

Three Things Actually Move the Needle

01 Miles

It's not the mode, it's the miles. Drive less, ride more.

02 Wires

Don't carry your fuel. Plug the train in.

03 Lungs

Clean air comes along for the ride.

...then the next stop: what HSRA is building in Illinois right now.

The Hook — Miles — Wires — Lungs — Next Stop



01 · MILES

What If America Moved Like France?

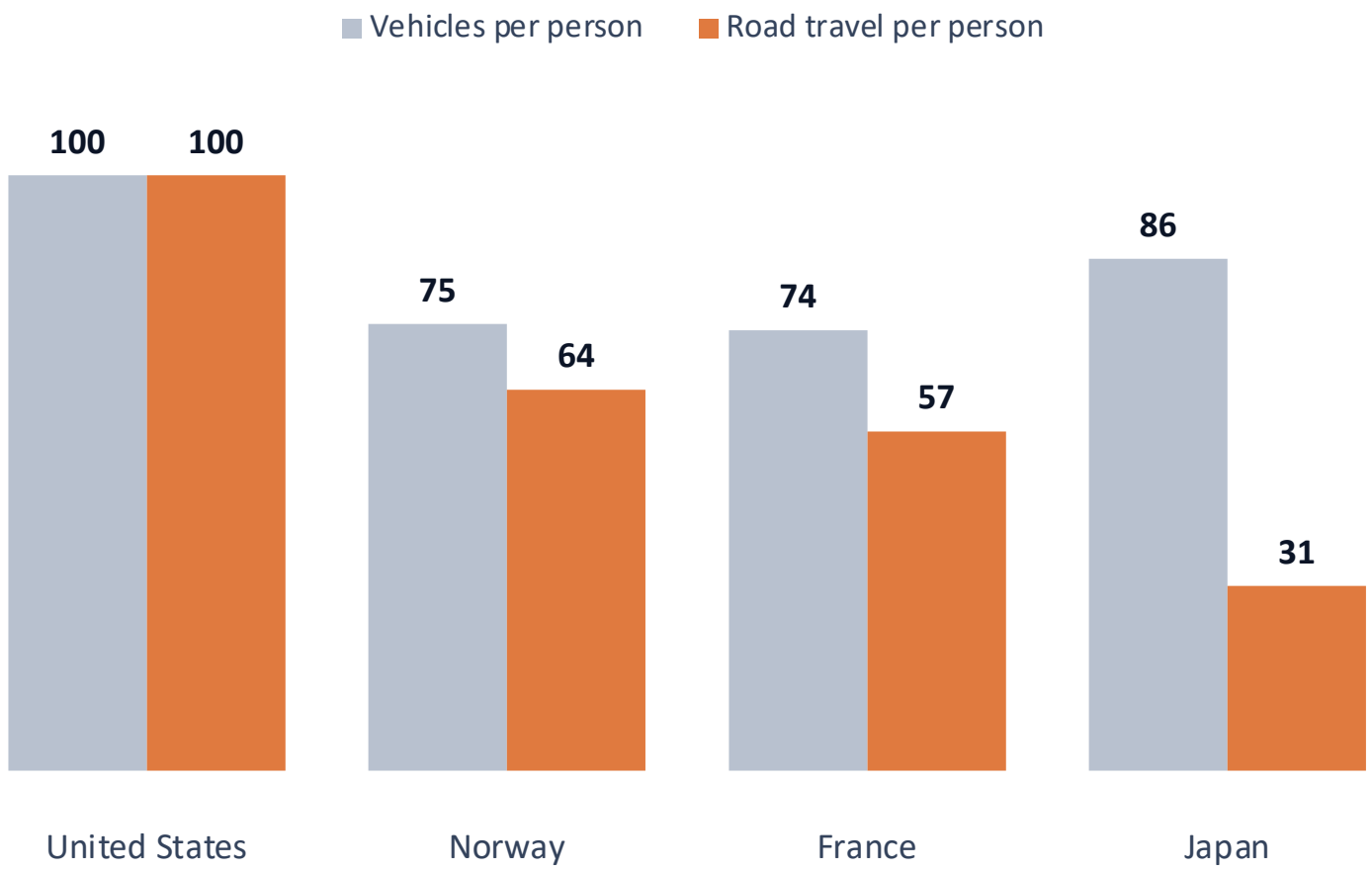
1981 TGV opens Paris–Lyon. Air travel on the route largely collapses.

2023 France bans short domestic flights where a ~2.5-hour train exists.

≈ Paris–Lyon is roughly Chicago–St. Louis.

Photo: Phillip Capper · CC BY 2.0 · Wikimedia Commons

It’s Not the Mode; It’s the Miles…



~2×

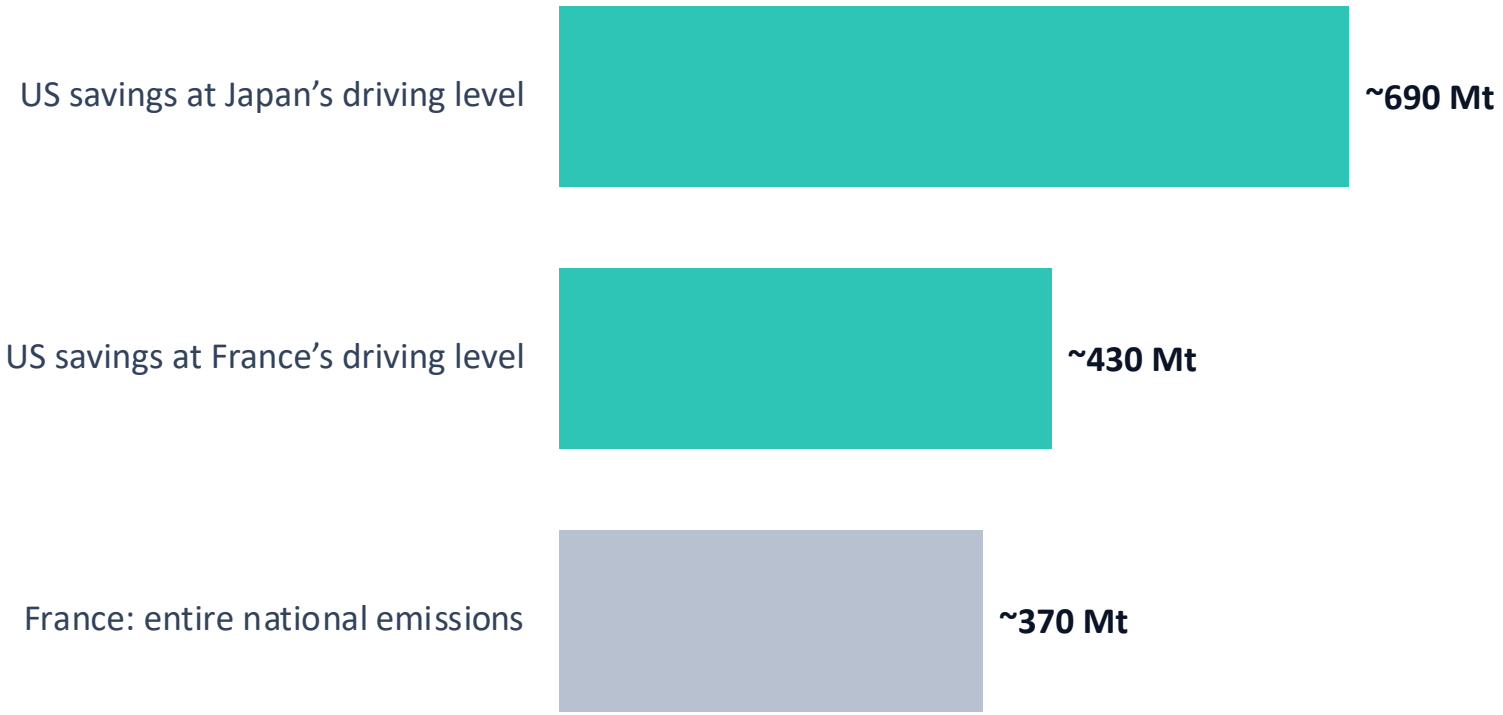
Americans drive about twice the miles per person of the French or Japanese.

Ownership is close: 779 vehicles per 1,000 people in the US vs. 670 in Japan.

Index, United States = 100. Vehicles per 1,000 people (US, Japan 2023–24; France, Norway 2014); OECD road passenger-km per capita (2020–23). Mixed years, directional.

Climate Change Math

Drive like France, erase a France



400–500

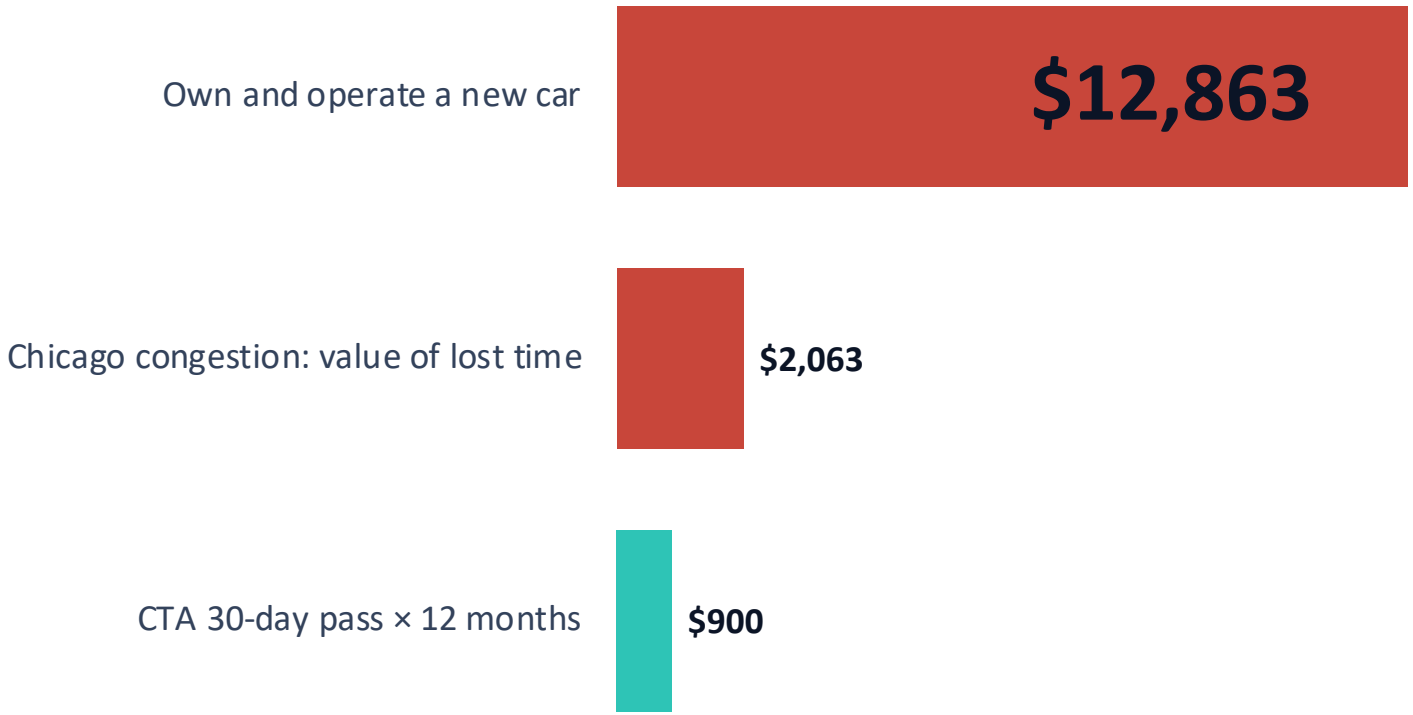
million tonnes CO_2e a year saved by driving at peer-country levels

That’s more than France emits in a year, from every source.

Annual CO_2e, million tonnes. EPA GHG Inventory (US light-duty vehicles ≈ 1,000 Mt); France national inventory (≈ 370 Mt); OECD road travel per capita. Illustrative estimate.

Time is Money (and Money is Time)

What a car costs vs. what a pass costs



14×

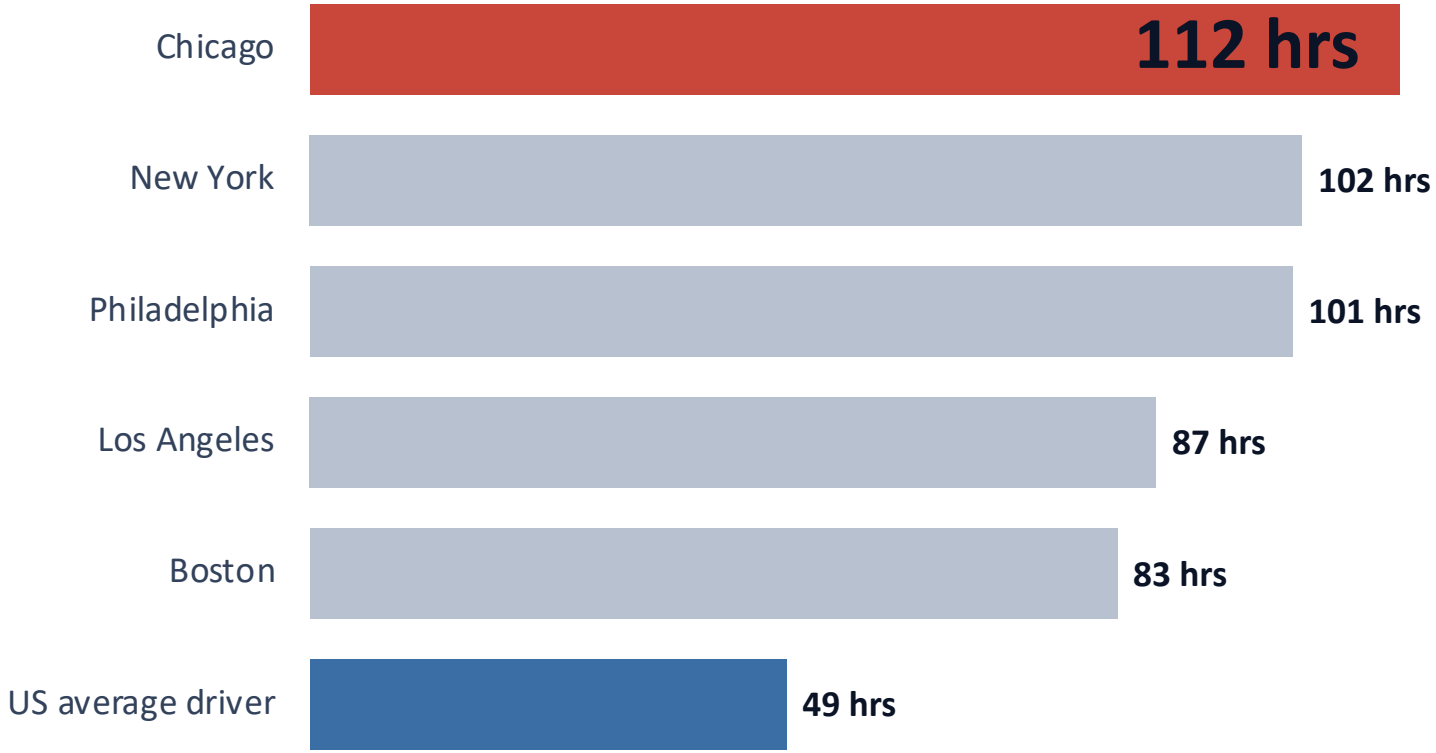
A year of driving a new car costs about 14 times a year of transit passes.

$12,863 vs. $900 a year, before you count the time.

Annual cost per person, US dollars. AAA Your Driving Costs 2026 ($12,863); INRIX 2025 Global Traffic Scorecard ($2,063); CTA fare ($75 per 30 days).

Time is Money (and Money is Time)

Chicago: #1 in America for time lost in traffic



112 hrs

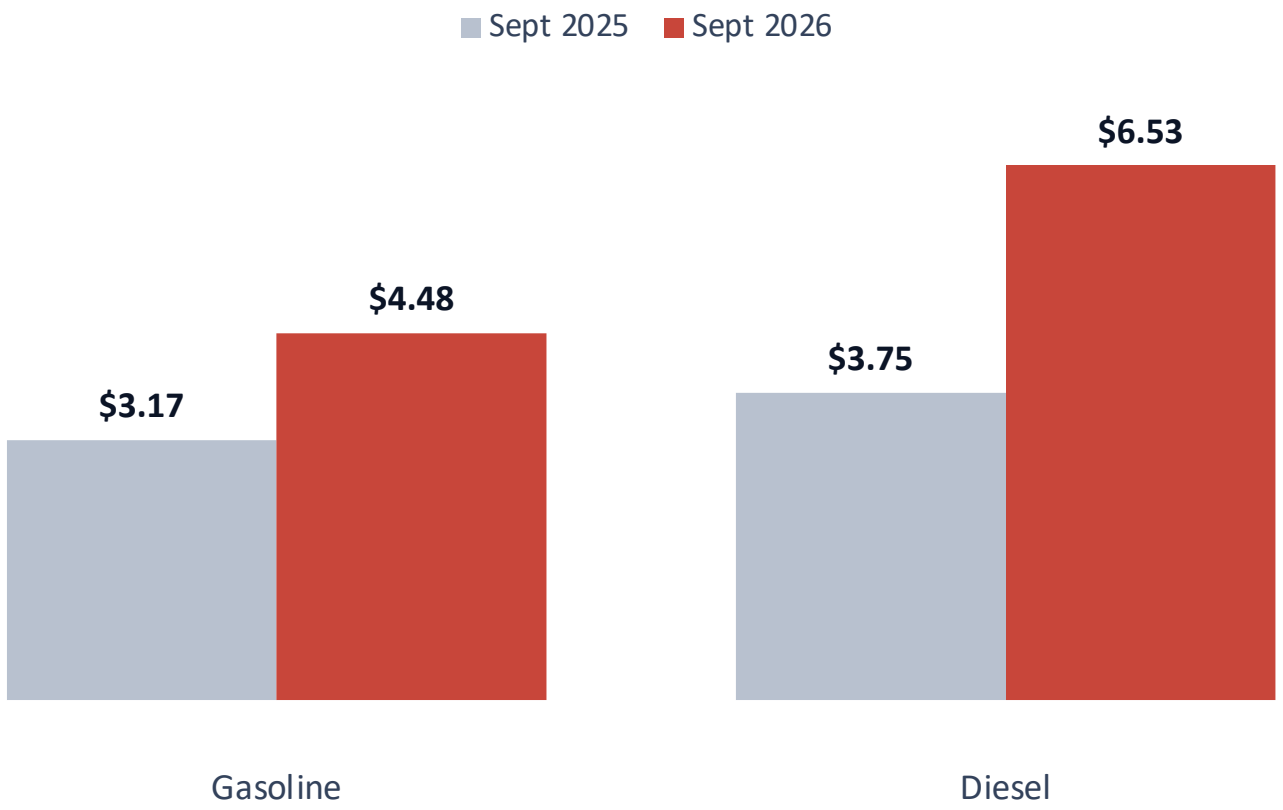
lost per Chicago driver in 2025

Nearly three full 40-hour work weeks a year, sitting in traffic.

Hours lost to congestion per driver, 2025. INRIX 2025 Global Traffic Scorecard.

Time Is Money (and Money Is Time)

Fuel is expensive again, and diesel most of all



+74%

Diesel, year over year

Gasoline is up 41%. A train on wires doesn't care what a barrel costs.

US average retail price, $/gallon, week of September 21. US EIA Gasoline and Diesel Fuel Update, September 2026 (year-ago values derived from EIA year-over-year change).

EXERCISE · 30 SECONDS



Show of hands

How many of you drove here today?

How many came by train, bus, or the L?

“Everybody who drove: You’re about to spend part of your 112 hours getting home.”



Photo: Steven Vance · CC BY-SA 2.0 · Wikimedia Commons

YOUR CHALLENGE · THIS WEEK

Swap one trip

Pick one trip you make by car that a train could make instead. Price it both ways, including your time.

Why: It's not the mode, it's the miles. Every mile you move is the needle moving.

02 · WIRES

The Railroad That Sold Its Wires

“My great uncle’s railroad bet on diesel. The railroad next door bet on wires.”

The Milwaukee Road ran electric trains over the Rockies and the Cascades.

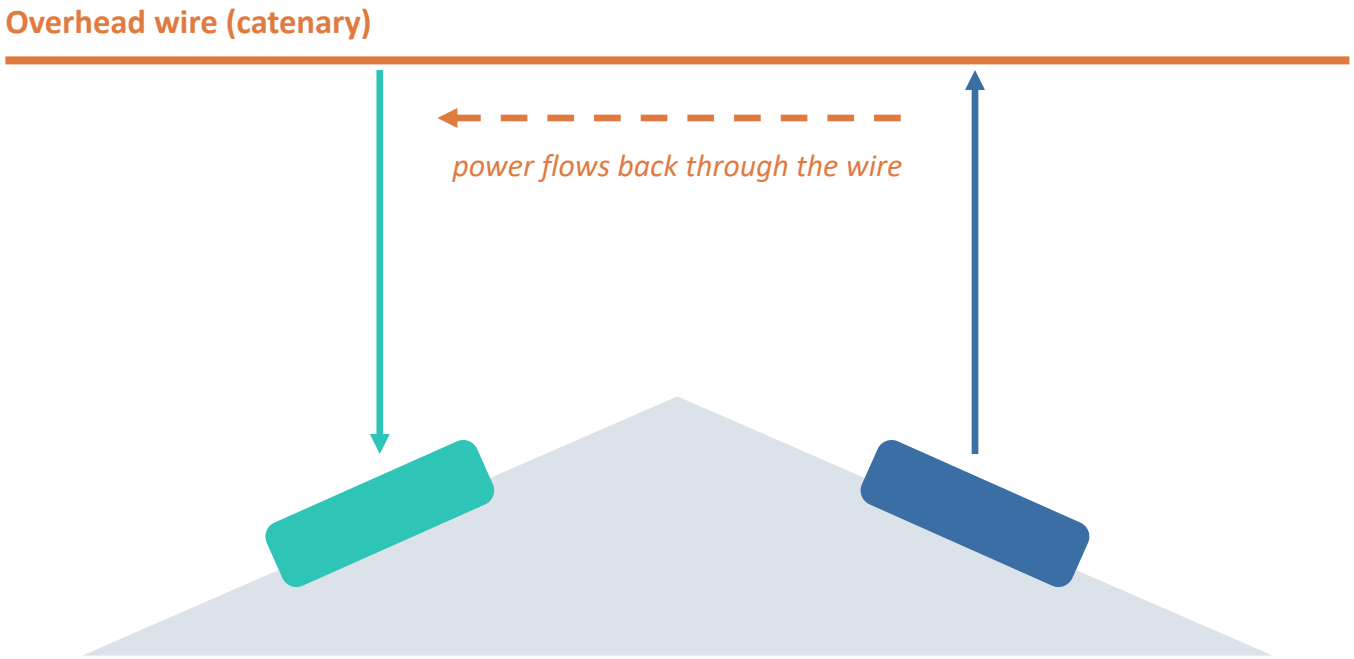


Photo: Craig Garver · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons

Don’t Carry; Catenary



Photo: Asahel Curtis · Public domain · Wikimedia Commons



Uphill train draws that power to climb

Downhill train brakes: Its motors become generators and feed the wire

A diesel can’t do that. Neither can a hydrogen tank.

Bad Timing



Feb 1973

Railroad announces it will shut down the electrification

Oct 1973

Arab oil embargo hits; oil prices soar

Jun 15, 1974

Wires de-energized for good. Copper scrap sells at ~half its Feb ’73 price

1977

Milwaukee Road goes bankrupt

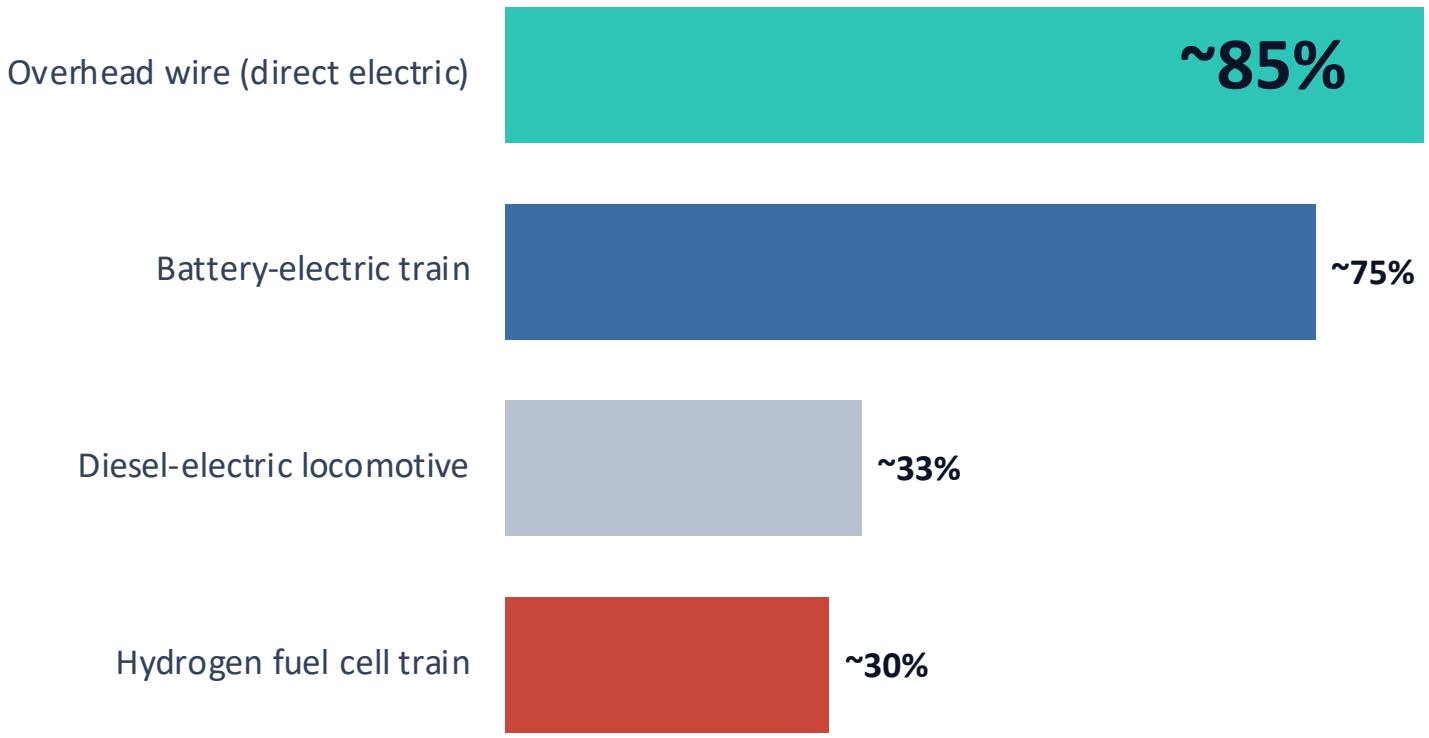
1980

Pacific Extension abandoned

The moral: The technology wasn’t the failure. The capital decisions were.

The Physics

Don’t carry your fuel. Just plug the train in.



2.5×

the energy to the wheels: about 85% from a wire vs. 33% from diesel

Two and a half times the work from the same energy, and the wire gives some back on the way downhill.

Share of input energy reaching the wheels; electric measured from the grid, diesel from the tank. Typical ranges from rail and DOE literature (wire 80–90%, battery 70–80%, diesel 30–35%, hydrogen 25–35%); midpoints shown.



Photo: HistorySports · CC BY 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

02 · WIRES

We Already Know this in Chicago

100

years of electric trains on Chicago’s lakefront

1926 Illinois Central electrifies its lakefront commuter line after the city pushes to get the smoke off the lakefront.

2026 It still runs today as Metra Electric, and this year is its centennial.

Chicago didn’t wait for permission. It just plugged the train in.

Diesel was Right in 1934



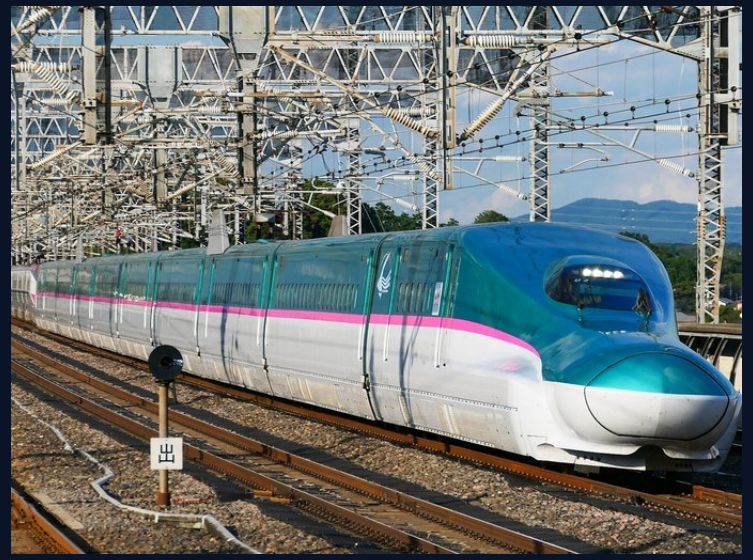
Coal

The smoke everyone accepted



Diesel beat coal

1934: fast, clean(er), modern



Wires beat diesel

Today: fast, clean, modern

The Zephyr proved Americans will choose rail when it's fast and modern. That's the standard to hold today.

Photos: Jack Delano (PD); Daderot · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons; MaedaAkihiko · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons



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YOUR CHALLENGE · THIS WEEK

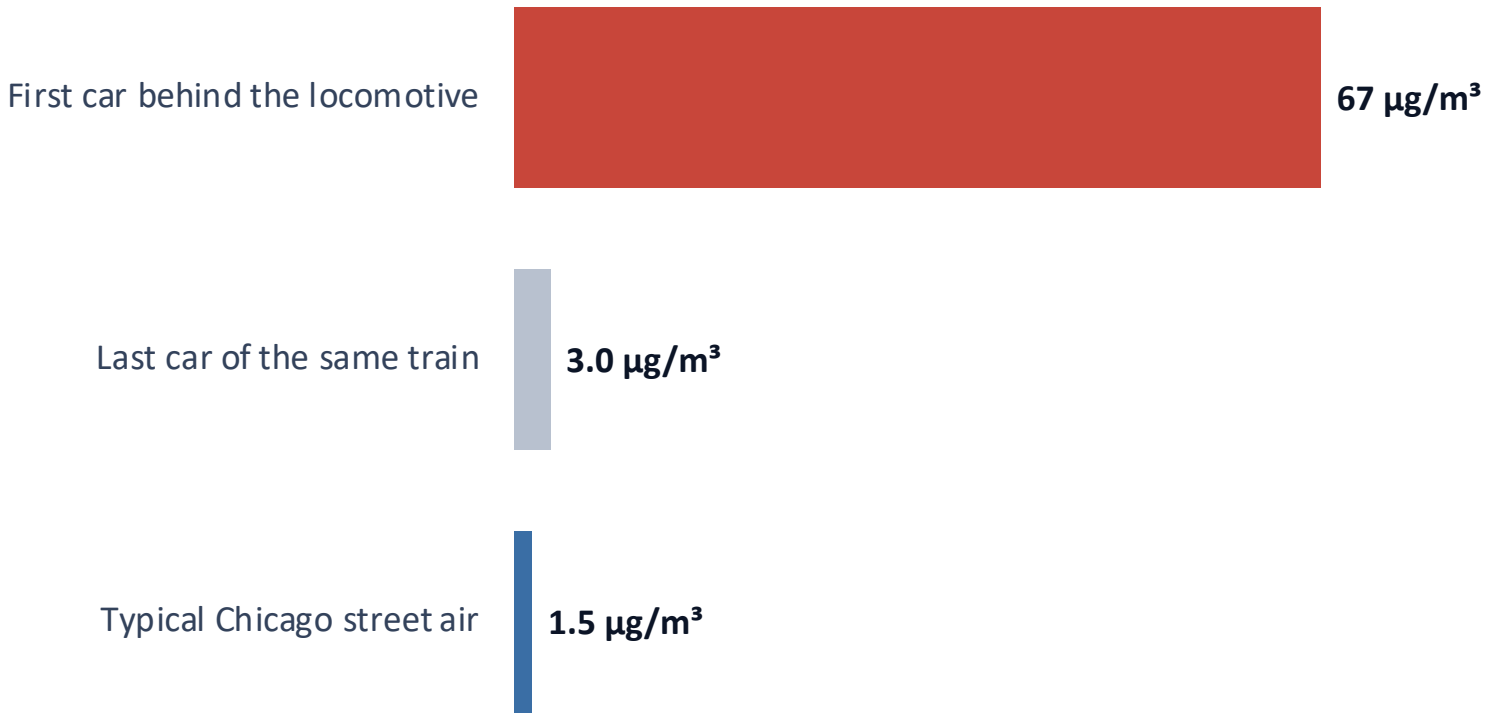
Ride the wire

Ride Metra Electric before its centennial year ends. Notice what isn't there: no engine roar, no exhaust.

Why: Chicago has run trains on wires for 100 years. Feel what it's like.

Coal (Off)ender

The first car behind the locomotive



Up to 72×

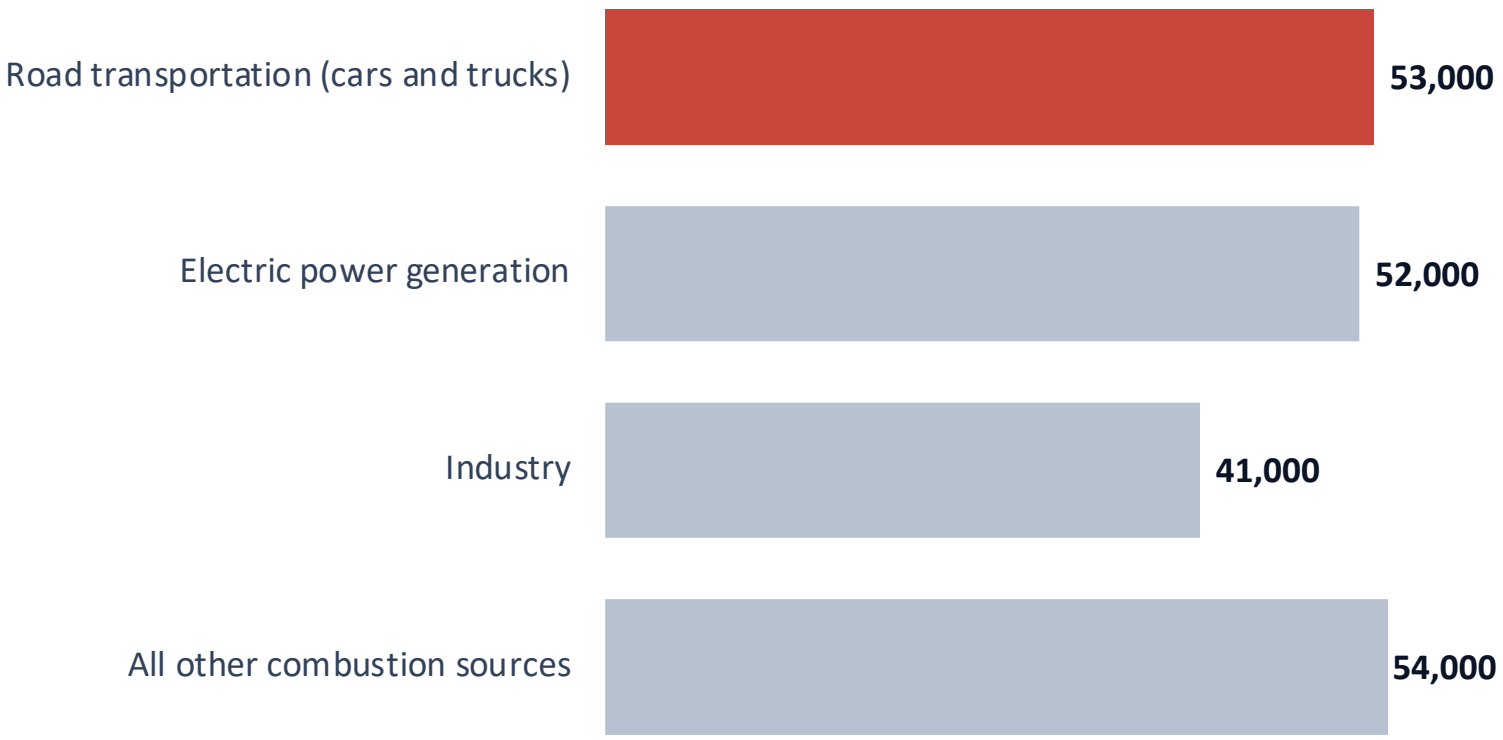
more diesel soot inside outbound cars than on neighboring streets

Worst: first car, outbound, south platform at Union Station. That platform is next door.

Average diesel soot (black carbon) on outbound Metra trains, before filter upgrades. Metra air-quality testing as reported by the Chicago Tribune (2011); typical Chicago levels 1–2 µg/m³.

Not Just Trains…

Tailpipes are America's deadliest air polluter





~53,000

premature US deaths a year from road-transportation emissions

Estimated US premature deaths per year from combustion PM2.5, by source (~200,000 total). Caiazzo et al., MIT, Atmospheric Environment (2013), 2005 emissions. "All other" is the remainder.

Photo: Steven Vance · CC BY-SA 2.0 · Wikimedia Commons

Feeding Two Birds With One Seed

Mode shift

removes tailpipes

+

Electrification

removes smokestacks

=

Climate + clean air

one investment, two returns

Stories one and two converge here: fewer miles, cleaner miles.

Photo: Kabelleger / David Gubler · CC BY-SA 3.0 · Wikimedia Commons

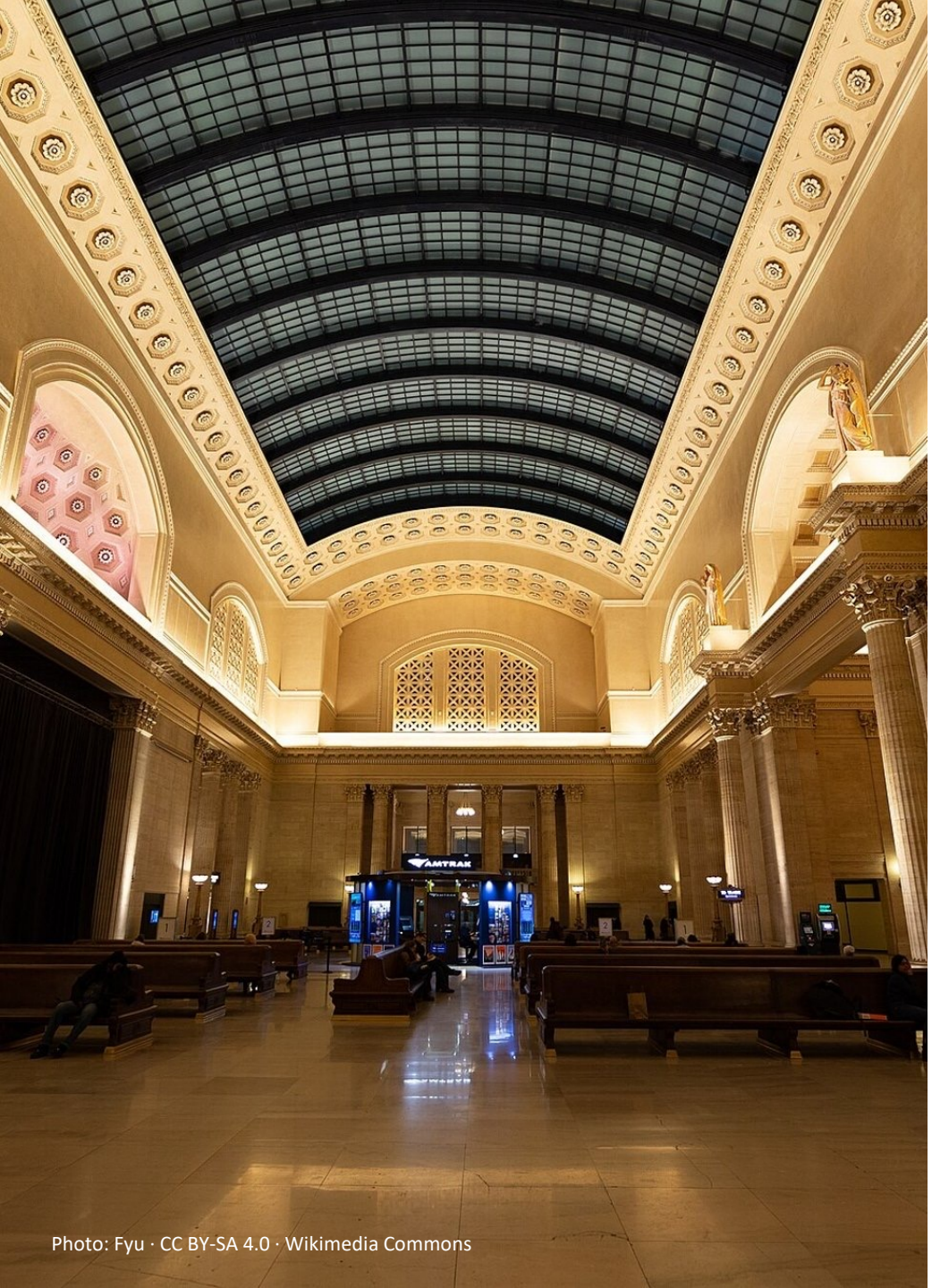
EXERCISE · 20 SECONDS



Show of hands

Who’s ever sat in the first car behind the engine because it was closest to the stairs?

“Me too.”



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YOUR CHALLENGE · THIS WEEK

Tell one person “72 times”

Before today is over, tell one person outside this room the “72 times” number.

Why: Clean air is the argument that wins over people who don’t care about climate.

NEXT STOP

We Did it! (Progress)

2021

HSRA plays a key role in creating the Illinois High-Speed Railway Commission and earns a seat at the planning table.

2025

HSRA members help our coalition partners pass the NITA Act, shifting $860 million a year from roads to trains and transit statewide.

2026

Gov. Pritzker signs HB 4442 into law, extending the Illinois High-Speed Railway Commission until January 1, 2030.



Photo: Daniel Schwen · CC BY-SA 4.0 · Wikimedia Commons

NEXT STOP

What's Next



144 minutes

O'Hare to East St. Louis: the concept

- **Recommend the route**
- **Choose the Chicago station**
- **Get high-speed trains through Chicago to O'Hare**



NEXT STOP

Don’t Sell the Wires…

“In 1934, a Zephyr crossed half the country in a day and rolled into a World’s Fair as the future. The next version of that train gets planned in Illinois over the next four years.”

Help us build it.

Photo: Sebastian Terfloth · CC BY-SA 3.0 · Wikimedia Commons



What Do You Want the Next 8-Year-Old to Ride?

Photo: Naruciakk · CC0 · Wikimedia Commons

NEXT STOP · THE ASK

Become a Member of HSRA

HSRA helped create the High-Speed Railway Commission, extend it to 2030, and win dedicated funding for integrated regional transit. The next train gets planned over the next three years. Help us build it.

Scan to join hsrail.org/join-us

Join the High Speed Rail Alliance

hsrail.org/join-us

The Hook · Miles · Wires · Lungs · **Next Stop**

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Thank you

Questions?

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Closing Remarks

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High Speed Rail Alliance

BUILDING THE PASSENGER RAIL COALITION

2026 HSRA Annual Conference

November 13, 2026