

Draft Public Comment Report

Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission

April 4, 2014

The Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (NIRPC) is sponsored a 30-day public comment period and four public meetings on a proposed change to the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) Amendment Number 13. The comment period will began on Wednesday, March 12, 2014 and ended on Thursday, April 10, 2014.

The changes in Amendment No. 13 would add three new transit projects to the FY 2014-17 TIP:

- NICTD- Section 5309 - Draft Environmental Impact Study for Expansion of Commuter Rail (West Lake extension).
- Michigan City – CMAQ 3-Year Demonstration Grant for the La Porte County “Triangle” transit service.
- Michigan City – CMAQ -One (1) Expansion Transit Vehicle for the “Triangle” service.

Four public meetings were held as part of the 30-day comment period. The first public meeting was held on Saturday, March 22, at Munster Town Hall from 10:00 am to Noon.

The other three public meetings were all on Wednesday, March 26, 2014, in the following locations:

- Purdue University North Central, Westville, from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm
- LaPorte City Hall, LaPorte, from 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm
- Michigan City City Hall, Michigan City, 5:30 pm to 7:30 pm

Notification of the comment period was distributed to NIRPC’s media contacts, as well as NIRPC’s stakeholder and committee lists, including the Transportation Policy Committee and NIRPC Commission. Information was also distributed via the NIRPC website (www.nirpc.org) and NIRPC’s social media outlets. Additionally, Purdue North Central performed special outreach via their email lists.

The comments received at the meetings have been compiled into the following report, along with comments received on NIRPC’s telephone comment line at (219) 763-6060, ext. 160, via email, and via the United States Postal Service.

NIRPC greatly appreciates all those who took the time and effort to participate and provide input on these projects which are shaping the future of transit in Northwest Indiana.

On March 22, 2014 a public meeting was held at Munster Town Hall in Munster, Indiana. A brief presentation was given, and with staff and transit operator representatives available to gather questions and comments. There were ten attendees who provided the following comments:

Comment: Are we sure we are getting a good price? Is the train extension going to be in the right place?

NIRPC Response: *That is part of the job of the Environmental Impact Study (EIS).*

Comment: Illinois riders will use our parking lots. This new line is running a mile from the Illinois border. Why not use the rail line behind Walmart that runs along 41? It would help more communities paying this and goes south to Cedar Lake.

\$571 million for nine miles of track in nine years. One mile a year is a waste of money.

Only 5,000 users, barely 1% of the population of our area. A big benefit for very few and it benefits Chicago. What do we get?

We already have Illinois coming here in droves, just go to a gas station or shopping center. Illinois is broke. They can't wait to get out – we don't need to attract them.

Metra already has a line to Matteson and Richton. Why do we need more within a five mile drive? What is the environmental impact?

Amtrak already goes from Dyer to Union Station. Dyer has a brand new station and no users. Run more trains on the Amtrak line – it also goes southeast out of Dyer.

Our tax money...there was a 1.5% income tax increase this year and already it is being sucked out of our community on pet projects without any chance for our input.

We need new paved roads in our communities. Dyer can only pave the "worst" roads each year. Their general fund does not have the money. It costs \$¼ of a million to pave a mile of road. That is what we need to use this money on, or they will never be repaved. Drive the road behind Walgreens and see what I mean.

What will Downtown Chicago be like in 9 years? They are the next Detroit. Will people still want to work there? A train line to nowhere.

Younger tech workers want to live in the loop area. Google moved Motorola from Libertyville to the Merchandise Mart. So why do we think young workers will want to live in Northwest Indiana and commute downtown?

Why the artificial deadline of March 31st, just like Obamacare? We'll pass it first and read it later, per Nancy Pelosi. Why not a referendum: rail or paving existing roads?

Fallacy: The federal government will pay 2/3 of the cost. But we are the federal government. It is our debt and more debt on our children. Just raise the debt limit to pay for this? We are broke. It is time we lived within a budget and spent our money on real necessities, not "dreams."

NIRPC Response: *As a number of studies have shown, having a rail connection to downtown Chicago is important for the region economically. There are more jobs within a one mile radius of Millennium Station (Randolph & Michigan Avenue) than in all of Northwest Indiana.*

Amtrak cannot be used as a commuter service as its current schedule serves Dyer twice per day and is scheduled as an intercity train, not for commuter service. The South Shore Line expansion would serve a different group of riders.

Comment: What is the alignment?

NIRPC Response: *The old Monon right-of-way (ROW) is already owned by NICTD, but the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will help determine the best alignment and if the connection to the mainline should be made in Hammond or in Illinois.*

Comment: Is this the most cost-effective location to build an extension?

NIRPC Response: *That is the job of the EIS. It will help determine the most efficient and most fiscally responsible way to build it. Issues may arise in terms of existing east-west railroad intersecting the corridor, but the EIS will help figure that out.*

Comment: Will transfers to eastbound trains be available?

NIRPC Response: *That has come up, and it is a question that will be answered, once the operating characteristics are determined. There are several factors that will impact the ability to interconnect with the existing line.*

Comment: What about time slots for trains on the Metra line in Illinois?

NIRPC Response: *There are some slots already in rush hour that make sense, and some technical improvements can be done to help increase capacity further. Any improvements and scheduling will have to be done in conjunction with Metra.*

Comment: What is the projected cost? I've heard differing numbers.

NIRPC Response: *The projected cost of \$571 Million gets the railroad to Dyer, north of US 30.*

Comment: Will the trains be electric or diesel?

NIRPC Response: *This is part of the EIS, though the Chicago ordinance banning steam locomotives from the lakefront might be a factor. Diesel/electric hybrid locomotives are a strong possibility, with diesel power being used south of Hammond on the extension.*

Comment: Will there be a new yard? If so, where?

NIRPC Response: *There will most likely be a yard, preferably at a terminating point. Dyer would be a possibility.*

Comment: What about the reliability of federal funds?

NIRPC Response: *Transit funds work differently than most federal funds, and tend to be much more stable from year to year than other types of federal funding.*

Comment: What if the funds are not spent?

NIRPC Response: *Transit operators have the opportunity to spend their funds over several years. For examples, Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 funds will have to be spent down by FY2019.*

Comment: Transit doesn't make money. How much will this lose?

NIRPC Response: *Current annual loss for this project is projected to be \$10 million. As always, local match is a very important thing that must be addressed for transit to be funded in the region. It must also be kept in mind that highways also lose money and must be subsidized, just like transit.*

Comment: What will be the impact on personal properties?

NIRPC Response: *The ROW is still there, and the trains and rails will operate within that. However, stations and parking lots will require more space that might result in an impact on personal property.*

Comment: How many riders are expected?

NIRPC Response: *Current projections are for about 5,000 riders each weekday. There will be five (5) trains per day, mostly rush hour trains with a couple running in off-peak times. Rush hour headways would be about 20-30 minutes.*

Comment: How many cars are expected to be purchased?

NIRPC Response: *Thirty (30) to forty (40).*

Comment: Transportation projects need to be done in a more economically efficient manner. The double decker cars are a good example. Money was spent on these cars, yet they always seem to be empty.

NIRPC Response: **An attendee of the meeting, who is a regular rider, disputed this statement, saying that the double deck cars are regularly full.*

Comment: What about the bike trail that is currently in the Monon ROW?

NIRPC Response: *An agreement was made before the trail was built that it must be moved if the extension moves forward to construction.*

Comment: It seems like this has all already been decided. These public meetings are too late.

NIRPC Response: *That's not so. The process started in 1987 when the ROW was set aside for the possibility of the expansion in the future. The Town of Munster bought the land for a station location several years ago at the location of the old Simmons plant.*

Comment: What will be the impact on the current work on Manor Drive?

NIRPC Response: *The town doesn't currently know. Properties are currently being purchased and buildings removed to proceed with the current plans for the area.*

Comment: The bike path Munster is looking to build is on the "wrong" side of the ROW. I'm concerned that we are going to build this, only to have to tear it out again.

NIRPC Response: *While that is a concern, the town plans to move forward with the project. The EIS will give better detail*

Comment: A local sales tax should be used to help pay for the train, that way the cost will be paid by more than just Lake County residents.

NIRPC Response: *Indiana does not allow for local sales taxes to be created without approval by the General Assembly.*

On March 26, 2014 a public meeting was held at Purdue University-North Central in Westville, Indiana. A brief presentation was available, with staff and transit operator representatives available to gather questions and comments. Seven (7) of the comments recorded requested the expansion of service into Porter County, specifically Valparaiso and Chesterton. Two (2) of the comments recorded requested greater coverage in La Porte County, including Wanatah and points south as well as Rolling Prairie, Union Mills, Kingsford Heights, etc.

There were about 86 attendees who provided the following comments:

Comment: It would be nice if Valparaiso were included in this plan.

NIRPC Response: *The recommendations for expanding service to include Valparaiso, Chesterton, and other areas of Porter County will be passed on to the board that will be created to oversee the Triangle Service. It is this board that would pursue additional service and funding with new partners.*

Comment: Yes, we need more transport!

Comment: Try and get one for Valpo. It is a very helpful thing for people without cars.

NIRPC Response: *The recommendations for expanding service to include Valparaiso, Chesterton, and other areas of Porter County will be passed on to the board that will be created to oversee the Triangle Service. It is this board that would pursue additional service and funding with new partners.*

Comment: Great idea. It will help students save money on gas. It's a good service.

Comment: Would be great for more access for future students.

Comment: This would be helpful for many people and a good opportunity to test the concept of whether this would be an effective route.

Comment: A bus system would be great! I took the bus all of the time when I attended Purdue.

Comment: A great start and helpful. I think it would be used by students.

Comment: Good idea to reduce the number of cars on campus and make parking easier, but what about southern La Porte County?

Those of us in Wanatah and other La Porte County locations would appreciate less travel, e.g. a park and ride in Wanatah on 30 for area students.

NIRPC Response: *The recommendations for expanding service to include Wanatah and points south, as well as the Union Mills, Rolling Prairie, and Kingsford Heights areas will be passed on to the board that will be created to oversee the Triangle Service. It is this board that would pursue additional service and funding with new partners.*

Comment: Can we extend this to Valpo?

NIRPC Response: *The recommendations for expanding service to include Valparaiso, Chesterton, and other areas of Porter County will be passed on to the board that will be created to oversee the Triangle Service. It is this board that would pursue additional service and funding with new partners.*

Comment: I support the bus service and hope it happens.

Comment: I think this service would be highly beneficial for many students in the area, and would open up the possibility of more students attending PNC due to ease of access from areas containing more housing.

Comment: Parking lot needs to be well-lit. What about safety and vandalism to vehicles? Will there be a monthly fee? Maybe a charge card rather than paying each time.

NIRPC Response: *Security at park and ride lots is a standard part of this type of project. Riders will be able to purchase either a 10-ride pass or a 30-day pass. They will be offered at multiple locations, including Purdue North Central.*

Comment: This service is much needed! A lack of transportation to and from this campus has been a barrier to many students. In meeting first year traditional age students...a number of them don't have driver's licenses yet. So this service would be a great help! We need this service badly!

Comment: This is a great idea for students without cars.

Comment: I think it's a great idea. People should have the option to get to school for them not to have to pay gas, especially when they don't have the money for gas.

Comment: I think it would be a great opportunity. I personally know someone from this campus that had to drop out because of transportation issues. Possibly offering ER taxi service at a discounted rate for those that have car failure, etc. ex: \$20 round trip if living in LaPorte.

NIRPC Response: *We are passing this along to the transit operators for future coordinating opportunities.*

Comment: We need the bus service?

NIRPC Response: *Connecting to all three points has long been identified as a transit need in La Porte County. The bus service is meant to facilitate access between three major destinations in La Porte County, allowing greater connectivity and opportunity for economic and educational advancement.*

Comment: Public transportation is always good. The costs, location of the stops, time the buses will run are important to those who will use it.

NIRPC Response: *A public information campaign, including a website, will take place prior to the start of service to inform potential riders.*

Comment: I think it would help a lot.

Comment: Good idea!

Comment: The bus should stop at the South Shore Line and make more stops along the route. Branch out to other communities.

NIRPC Response: *The initial service is meant to serve as a commuter service. Transfers to other Michigan City Transit routes (including those serving the South Shore Line) will be possible in Michigan City.*

Comment: This is a great idea – a long time in coming. Please approve!

Comment: This would be a great opportunity to bring in new students, assist current students, and deter student costs! I greatly support!

Comment: I support the bus service – great idea.

Comment: Yes! Yes! Yes! I support. I work with students who would greatly benefit from this.

Comment: I wholeheartedly support public transit, especially for students, staff, and faculty. I do suggest that a Porter County stop be included as well.

NIRPC Response: *The recommendations for expanding service to include Valparaiso, Chesterton, and other areas of Porter County will be passed on to the board that will be created to oversee the Triangle Service. It is this board that would pursue additional service and funding with new partners.*

Comment: I am very supportive of public transportation, but would not support additional taxes, especially from outside the county. Being PNC would benefit from this, they should be included in the funding of the project. Not sure how you would accommodate both Michigan City and LaPorte folks that both need to be here at 8 am?

NIRPC Response: *Funding for the service has been identified and will not result in a tax increase. Purdue North Central is an equal funding partner with the City of Michigan City, the City of LaPorte, and La Porte County. The service will have three round trips on each leg in the morning, and three round trips on each leg in the afternoon. The morning trips would start during the 6:00 hour, though the finals schedule is still being determined.*

Comment: This sounds like an excellent idea! It would not only help with gas costs for students, it will lower gas emissions by lowering the amount of students traveling to and from PNC. I would like to see this considered for Porter County as well.

NIRPC Response: *The recommendations for expanding service to include Valparaiso, Chesterton, and other areas of Porter County will be passed on to the board that will be created to oversee the Triangle Service. It is this board that would pursue additional service and funding with new partners.*

Comment: I really appreciate the opportunity to use this bus system! I recommend having the bus extend to Valparaiso as well.

NIRPC Response: *The recommendations for expanding service to include Valparaiso, Chesterton, and other areas of Porter County will be passed on to the board that will be created to oversee the Triangle Service. It is this board that would pursue additional service and funding with new partners.*

Comment: I think that this is a long time coming. This service should be able to help move traffic around between the cities. I think that it will add the much needed foot traffic for our communities. The growth it could help bring is greatly needed for the malls, and brings a greatly needed service to PNC.

Comment: The idea of a commuter line connecting Michigan City & La Porte is long overdue, building a sense of cohesion countywide. As a Michigan City resident working at PNC, I would definitely utilize public transportation to commute. I'd hope eventually times and frequency of runs could increase.

Comment: This is a fantastic idea, eventually a round trip to Valparaiso and Chesterton would be ideal!

NIRPC Response: *The recommendations for expanding service to include Valparaiso, Chesterton, and other areas of Porter County will be passed on to the board that will be created to oversee the Triangle Service. It is this board that would pursue additional service and funding with new partners.*

Comment: I would use this service (I'm a PNC staff member). In the past, I have spoken with several students who would have benefited if this service would have been available. I hope it goes through.

Comment: I support transportation to PNC. So many students could benefit from this, whether it's temporary or permanent.

Comment: I am very much in support of the bus service and the assistance this could bring to so many students and staff.

Comment: I support providing transportation options to students at PNC. Thank you!

Comment: I think this is a very good idea. One main thing to encourage enrollment.

Comment: It sounds like a great program that will allow more people to have an easy access to the campus. It will also be eco-friendly because people will be taking a single vehicle to the campus.

Comment: The proposed access will enhance quality of life for residents of La Porte County. This NIRPC initiative will support economic opportunity, educational access, access to healthcare, employment, the arts, political participation, etc. This access holds particularly significant importance to citizens who are often marginalized and disenfranchised due to limited income or ability to drive. I think it will also contribute to a greater sense of connectedness and a larger sense of community between and among the individual cities/towns within the county. This can serve to strengthen the health of the county and enrich its citizens and potentially spur interest in future collaborative ventures – all to the good! Please consider this a starting point and expand this initiative to provide access to the more rural outer reaches of the county with stops in Kingsford Heights, Rolling Prairie, Union Mills, etc.

NIRPC Response: *The recommendations for expanding service to include the Union Mills, Rolling Prairie, and Kingsford Heights areas, as well as Wanatah and points south, will be passed on to the board that will be created to oversee the Triangle Service. It is this board that would pursue additional service and funding with new partners.*

On March 26, 2014 a public meeting was held at LaPorte City Hall in LaPorte, Indiana. A brief presentation was given, with staff and transit operator representatives available to gather questions and comments. There were four attendees who provided the following comments:

Comment: I recently took the South Shore Line to the Chicago Auto Show. We stopped in Gary and uncoupled cars. There were people standing in the aisles, which seemed like a safety hazard. What about the double decker cars that were bought? Why weren't they used? Maintenance of the existing line and service is needed before expansion can happen.

NIRPC Response: *NICTD must consider many things when scheduling equipment. Based on Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) regulations that mandate certain maintenance activities, the double decker cars were receiving scheduled service and were unavailable.*

Comment: Have the stops for the Triangle Service been selected?

NIRPC Response: *For the Michigan City to LaPorte route, stops will be at Marquette Mall, the medical complex at 400N, Coolspring Library, and Downtown LaPorte, with one morning run and one afternoon run to the LaPorte Industrial Park.*

The Michigan City to Purdue North Central route will be nonstop from Marquette Mall to campus.

The LaPorte to Purdue North Central stops will be in Downtown LaPorte, Maple Lane Mall (still finalizing details with the mall owners), the BP station at SR 2 & US 421 (flag stop), and Purdue North Central.

Changes can be made based on ridership and use. This is meant to be a commuter service with limited times and stops.

Comment: Will the busses be handicap accessible?

NIRPC Response: *Yes.*

Comment: Will Michigan City Transit (MCT) use existing equipment?

NIRPC Response: *MCT moved up an equipment purchase, and is also buying the bus to be used by LaPorte. The number of busses is such, however, that MCT can handle a new route.*

Comment: Is the \$120,000 in the amendment for the purchase of equipment for one or two busses?

NIRPC Response: *One bus.*

Comment: Would a \$2 fare be enough?

NIRPC Response: *The farebox is one part of how transit is funded. The project partners are working to identify as reasonable a fare as possible, probably in the \$1.50-\$2.00 range, one way.*

Comment: A few years ago, Michigan City had ridership problems, resulting in changes. Will this money be separated or commingled with other funds?

NIRPC Response: *This will be treated as a completely separate fund because it is a separate project.*

Comment: What will be the start and end times of the service?

NIRPC Response: *The exact schedule is still being considered, but since it will be a commuter service the times will be limited. Roughly looking into the 6:15 am to 6:00 pm range.*

Comment: How would one get from Marquette Mall to the South Shore Line station in Michigan City?

NIRPC Response: *The Michigan City leg of the service will start and end at the city's transit hub at Marquette Mall. From there, a rider will have access to all of Michigan City Transit's routes, including those serving the South Shore, the hospital, and the US 421 corridor.*

On March 26, 2014 a public meeting was held at Michigan City City Hall in Michigan City, Indiana. A brief presentation was available, with staff and transit operator representatives available to gather questions and comments. There was one attendee who provided the following comments:

Comments from Brenda Brown, Family and Social Services, Michigan City

Ms. Brown spoke in favor of the proposed project, citing her clients' need to travel between Michigan City and La Porte to access health and government services. She noted that she has observed people walking between the cities, which is not safe due to lack of sidewalks. Also discussed was the potential to improve access to employment opportunities in the La Porte Industrial Park, which is another area of great need for her clients.

These comments were received via email at comments@nirpc.org.

3/23/2014

Hi, my name is Alice Wasick. I live in Michigan City, and I go to PNC. I live right next to a bus stop. Me and my husband have to share a car, after his broke down. It is hard to make it work. It would be AMAZING if I could take the bus to school in the mornings and home again! Please, add PNC to the "Ride the Wave" routes.

NIRPC Response: *NIRPC appreciates your input and thanks you for your involvement in this process.*

3/31/2014

I would respectfully like to submit the following commentary regarding the proposed changes in Amendment No. 13:

- NICTD- Section 5309 - Tier II Environmental Impact Study for Expansion of Commuter Rail (West Lake extension). Funds requested include \$522,290 federal, and \$2,477,710 local, for a total of \$3,000,000.

Attached is an "At A Glance" comparison I would also like to submit with my commentary. Please consider exploring the "Elsdon Subdivision Alternative Option" as part of the Tier II study.

"As many people are aware, the Honorable Congressman Visclosky has recently spent a considerable amount of time in Lake County, visiting with each of our 19 cities and towns with his hat in his hand. He is asking each municipality for a portion of their recently acquired CEDIT funds. The request coincidentally is for 1/3rd of their funds for the next 30 years, for 1/3rd of a proposed three phase project.

Simply stated, the Congressman is promoting a 27 year old plan to expand a 100 year old railroad, with "No Guarantees" given. Visclosky also continues to talk about a March 31st. deadline. Although the deadline has been called "arbitrary" it is actually quite important. The METRA commuter railroad is proposing a similar project originating in Crete called the "South East Service." It will be a 33-mile long line which will serve 20 communities and is expected to carry nearly 20,000 riders per day to downtown Chicago. The Federal government will not approve funding for BOTH projects.

The Congressman often touts that this project was first proposed by Hammond Councilwoman Janet Moran in 1987. A lot has changed in the region since the conception of this project. For one, in 2009 the Canadian National acquired the E.J. & E. Railroad. This allowed the CN to reroute trains from their existing "Elsdon Subdivision," bypassing Chicago by using the newly acquired rail line. The CN's previous route through Munster and Highland is now functionally obsolete despite pristine double track age.

This line, which parallels 45th avenue in Munster, has an existing connection to southbound CSX tracks near the Illinois border, which are proposed to be used for a future Lowell extension. The line travels east through Lake County and eventually leads to Valparaiso. Traveling west into Illinois, this line crosses existing track age that would be used for the "SES" project, as well the existing METRA electric line from University Park with interchanges already in place. The SES project has a \$778 million price tag and the Westlake Extension is \$615 million.

I believe that if there was a cooperative rather than competitive effort between the two states similar to that used for the "Illiana Expressway" both states could each benefit from a new commuter rail line for

approximately half of the respective prices. Many local residents have said that they have little concern about this project as they “don’t expect to be around to see it.” Well I am a region resident young enough that God willing will eventually not only see whatever incarnation of this railroad running, but I will be also be around long enough to be forced to pay for it, no matter what the price, no matter how many people use it.”

Charles Pullen

NIRPC Response: *It is during the EIS process that all alternatives to the proposed project will be explored, along with a cost-benefit analysis. NIRPC will keep stakeholders informed as the process unfolds and questions like these are answered.*

****The attachment mentioned can be found on the next page.***

South Shore Extension Comparison (At a Glance)

	Elsdon Sub. (Proposed)	Monon Route (Planned)
Miles of Travel, Munster to Kensington Station	14	14
Freight Line Crossings	2	10
Track Speed	60 m.p.h.	30 m.p.h.
Number of Tracks	2	1
Number of Grade Level Road Crossings (Est.)	5 to 10	15 to 10
Total Miles of New Track	0	6
Time to Completion	3-5 years	10 years
Towns with Proposed Stations	Munster Schererville Merrillville	Munster Dyer Lowell
Total Population of Towns Served (2010)	124,000	49,000
Estimated TOTAL COST (In Millions)	\$150-\$200	\$571 - \$615

The Elsdon Subdivision was formerly used by the Canadian National Railroad before their acquisition of the E.J.&E. in 2009. This track now sees limited use by the CN and CSX Railroads. The track is in excellent condition and grade crossing separations already exist at several major intersections, minimizing traffic delays.

Prepared by: Chuck Pullen (chuck.pullen@gmail.com) 3/31/14