The latest tangible sign of high-speed passenger rail service in the Midwest should arrive before the year is out: New, state-of-the-art “Charger” locomotives are ready for delivery, attendees of the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission’s annual meeting were told in September.

The locomotives, made in Sacramento, Calif., by Siemens, have been successfully tested along Amtrak’s Northeast corridor between Washington, D.C., and New York City, and at the Transportation Technology Center in Pueblo, Colo., said Dave Ward, vice president of Siemens Locomotives’ North America division.

They’re part of a $268 million Federal Railroad Administration grant to the Midwest to replace aging locomotives and railcars with modern equipment capable of high-speed operations along eight state-supported routes in the region. (For technical reasons, delivery of the railcars has been pushed back and is now scheduled to start in 2020.)

The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative, first developed in 1998, envisions high-speed rail routes emanating from Chicago and providing service to Detroit, St. Louis, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Milwaukee and Minneapolis-St. Paul via passenger trains traveling at 110 mph. (That same regional plan also calls for improved service on other corridors as well as new routes for the region.)

The first stretch of 110-mph service, between Porter, Ind., and Kalamazoo, Mich., on the Chicago-Detroit/Pontiac corridor, began in February 2012. Michigan is now upgrading the line to allow for similar speeds on most of that route. Work should be complete by November 2017, said Tim Hoeffner, director of the Michigan Department of Transportation’s rail office. (Hoeffner also serves as chair of the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission.)

On the Chicago-St. Louis corridor, the Illinois Department of Transportation plans to complete upgrades to allow for speeds up to 110 mph on the entire corridor in the second half of 2017 or by early 2018.

In addition, Positive Train Control, a computer-controlled tracking and signaling system that is a must for high-speed operations, is under a congressional deadline to be running on all passenger lines by Dec. 31, 2018.

Other rail improvement projects and/or studies underway in the region include:

- In 2015, the Federal Railroad Administration announced that it will develop 30- to 40-year regional rail plans for the Midwest and Southeast. The Midwest’s plan will build on the Regional Rail Initiative. (In 2014, the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission applied for participation in the FRA project on behalf of the Midwest.)
- Minnesota and Wisconsin are studying the viability of a second daily train between the Twin Cities, Milwaukee and Chicago along the Empire Builder route, and Wisconsin and Illinois are studying how to increase Chicago-Milwaukee Hiawatha service from seven to 10 daily round-trips.
- Michigan is studying two new routes: the east-west Coast-to-Coast line between Detroit, Lansing and Holland; and the A2TC line from Ann Arbor north to Traverse City and Petoskey.