Ridership on seven of nine state-supported Amtrak routes in the Midwest has grown by leaps and bounds over the last 10 fiscal years, but has dropped during the last five — a situation that state officials attribute at least in part to construction projects that aim to increase ridership and improve travel times over the long term.

Total ridership on the routes grew 42 percent from fiscal years 2006 to 2016 (up to a total of 2,705,848 passengers), but dropped 8 percent from FY 2011 to FY 2016.

Corridor improvement projects got underway after 2011, when federal funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 began flowing to state departments of transportation. Illinois saw the region’s greatest 10-year growth on state-supported routes:

- The Chicago-St. Louis corridor, which hosts the state-supported Lincoln Service trains and the long-distance Texas Eagle (Chicago-San Antonio), jumped 109 percent;
- The Chicago-Carbondale corridor, host to the state-supported Illini/Saluki trains and the long distance City of New Orleans (Chicago-Memphis-New Orleans) grew by 92 percent; and
- The Chicago-Quincy corridor, host to the state-supported Illinois Zephyr and Carl Sandburg trains plus the long-distance Southwest Chief (Chicago-Los Angeles) and California Zephyr (Chicago-Denver-Emeryville, Ca.), grew by 69 percent.

Michigan’s Blue Water service (Chicago-Port Huron) also saw 10-year ridership rise 48 percent. The only routes in the Midwest to lose 10-year ridership were the Pere Marquette (Chicago-Grand Rapids) and Wolverine (Chicago-Detroit-Pontiac) trains. Tim Hoefner, director of the Office of Rail at the Michigan Department of Transportation, said the drops were due to “infrastructure work and alternative operating schedules.”

In 2012, the Chicago-Detroit corridor became the first route outside the Northeast to be rated for 110-mph service, and now the line is being double-tracked in order to extend that service to another part of the route. Meanwhile, part of the Chicago-St. Louis corridor is expected to have up to 110-mph service by late 2017.

Derrick James, a senior manager for Amtrak, said another reason for the five-year ridership drop is lower gasoline prices: The nationwide average price per gallon fell from $3.40 in FY 2011 to $2.13 in FY 2016, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.
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