The Federal Railroad Administration has formally launched an 18-month study that is exploring the long-term development of high-performance, intercity passenger rail service for the Midwest.

This project’s roots date back to the U.S. Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 and that law’s call for “a long-range national rail plan.” Such a plan, in turn, relies on regional coordination. In 2011, for example, the FRA conducted a study of the Southwest in which it developed a “toolkit” for use in regional planning efforts.

At the same time, the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission (MIPRC) and the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative began talks with federal officials. These two groups proposed a series of workshops that would help identify the institutional, financial, political and regulatory structures that the Midwest needs to improve intercity passenger rail service.

On behalf of the region, MIPRC submitted a formal proposal for an FRA-led study in 2014. (CSG Midwest provides staff support to MIPRC.)

What rail corridors and investment projects should be prioritized in order to strengthen intercity service? What are the funding options and strategies? What kind of governance model could states in the Midwest employ? These are among the questions state and federal officials will explore as they “produce a 40-year framework for the Midwest intercity passenger rail network.”

The regional study began in March with a workshop in Chicago; the next meeting will be held June 7 in St. Paul, Minn., and will focus in part on governance issues.

The FRA’s lead stakeholders in this planning process are MIPRC and 12 state departments of transportation in the Midwest. The 18-month study also includes participation by local governments, metropolitan planning organizations, railroads, public and private passenger rail operators, transit agencies, and advocacy groups.

“MIPRC is excited to work with the FRA and the region’s departments of transportation, and local leaders, to develop the version of our long-term strategy for intercity passenger rail in the Midwest,” says Tim Hoeffner, the chair of MIPRC and director of the Michigan Department of Transportation’s Office of Rail.

“Starting with the development of the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative plan in the ‘90s, the Midwest has been leading regional intercity passenger rail planning.”

Developed by the region’s state departments of transportation, the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative envisions a 3,000-mile, nine-state passenger rail system with Chicago as its hub — with fast, frequent service on eight improved and new corridors connecting some of the region’s largest cities.

This plan has served as the blueprint for most of the Midwestern states’ applications to the federal High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail grant program. Under this program, the Midwest was awarded $2.5 billion between 2009 and 2011.

For more about the Midwest Regional Rail Planning Study, visit www.midwestrailplan.org.

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