
Sponsor: Public Works

Meeting Date: 3/17/2026

Title: 2026 Funding Commitment to the Great River Rail Commission

File Number: 2026-053

Background and Rationale:

The Great River Rail Commission (Commission) is a joint powers board established under Minnesota Statutes, Section 471.59. Member parties on the Commission include the regional railroad authorities from Ramsey County, Goodhue County, Wabasha County, Washington County and Winona County, the La Crosse Area Planning Committee, the cities of Cottage Grove, Goodview, Hastings, Lake City, Newport, Red Wing, Saint Charles, Saint Paul, Saint Paul Park, Utica, Wabasha and Winona, and Wacouta Township.

The *Borealis* is a daily round-trip passenger train that serves 13 cities between Union Depot in Saint Paul and Chicago Union Station. The *Borealis* is state-supported service meaning operations financially supported by Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois and through ticket sales, but the train is operated by Amtrak. The *Borealis* began service on May 21, 2024, and surpassed 250,000 riders in July 2025, far exceeding annual forecasts of 150,000. The *Borealis* overnights at Union Depot where it receives light maintenance, cleaning and restocking of the café by an Amtrak contractor before its eastbound daily trip.

The Commission actively supported the development of the *Borealis* by using its communication resources to inform the public of the benefits of increased passenger rail service and activating their support. The Commission successfully lobbied state legislators to provide \$10 million as Minnesota's share to match a federal grant for track and signal improvements. The Commission also provided an opportunity for public engagement at their regular meetings during the development of the *Borealis* service.

Pursuant to the members' Joint Powers Agreement (JPA), the five regional railroad authorities and the La Crosse Area Planning Committee are financial parties, responsible for payment of annual dues that fund the Commission's annual work plan. The dues are based on a formula established in the JPA that includes population, existing passenger rail route mileage, and station stops within the jurisdiction of each financial party and a base amount shared equally among all financial parties.

The Commission considered several revenue options and adopted a 2026 Work Plan and Budget of \$50,000 on November 6, 2025. The budget will be supplemented with \$10,000 from its funding reserves. Within the Commission's final adopted budget, Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority's 2026 funding commitment was identified as \$16,400.

More information about the Great River Rail Commission can be found at:

<https://www.greatriversrail.org/>

Recommendation:

The Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority resolved to:

1. Accept the Great River Rail Commission's 2026 Work Plan and Budget.
2. Approve the payment of \$16,400 to the Great River Rail Commission as the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority funding commitment to the Great River Rail Commission 2026 Work Plan and Budget.
3. Authorize the County Manager to establish a project budget for the Great River Rail Commission in the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority budget.

A motion to approve was made by Commissioner Xiong, seconded by Commissioner Moran.
Motion passed.

Aye: - 7: Jebens-Singh, McGuire, McMurtrey, Miller, Moran, Ortega, and Xiong

By: 

Jason Yang, Chief Clerk - County Board