

State Rail Planning Best Practices Volume 2



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
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Foreword

State Rail Planning Best Practices, Volume 2 is a companion to *State Rail Planning Best Practices, First Edition*, which was first published in 2009 to provide AASHTO members and the broader rail planning community with practical guidance on how to develop state rail plans that comply with federal guidelines while also accounting for the unique circumstances of each state. Volume 2 complements the First Edition by summarizing states' activity over the last 5 years to develop state rail plans since the enactment of the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (PRIIA). This report draws from the latest generation of state rail plans to document current best practices. The report also summarizes the experiences of states that participated in a state rail planning survey conducted by AASHTO in 2013. The objective of this report is to serve as a resource to inform and improve the development of future state rail plans.

Acknowledgement

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Section 1—Introduction

State rail planning activities have changed dramatically since enactment of the landmark rail planning legislation contained in the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA). When it was published in November of 2009, State Rail Planning

What is state rail planning?

For the purposes of this report, state rail planning is the activity culminating in the development of a state rail plan—an official document that guides state freight and passenger rail development and policies.

Best Practices provided immediate insight and guidance to state rail agencies and stakeholders as they developed the first generation of post-PRIIA plans. Since 2009, the practice of state rail planning has continued to evolve. The latest generation of post-PRIIA plans features greater orientation toward passenger rail planning and greater focus on project evaluation. Since PRIIA was enacted, the number of states with current state rail plans blossomed from a dozen or so to over 40. During this period of rapid expansion of state rail planning activity, the practice has matured to encompass a wide range of approaches.

1.1 Objective

The primary objective of Best Practices, Volume 2 is to identify best practices from a broad body of recently completed state rail planning work to empower future planners with ideas and examples that will improve the efficacy of their efforts. This guidance will be timely as states contemplate future actions following a flurry of recent state rail planning activity from 2009 to 2015.

1.2 Approach

This report draws from nearly 40 of the most recently completed or nearly completed state rail plans to identify changes in rail planning since 2009, to identify best practices, and to provide guidance on lingering challenges. To support the development of this report, AASHTO conducted a nationwide survey of state rail planning officials in 2013.

The survey gauged the experiences of state DOTs in preparing the latest generation of state rail plans. The findings illuminated some key questions about the state of state rail planning—including the primary motivations for developing a plan, details on who developed it, and how it was developed. One of the most important outcomes of the survey was that it produced a list of persistent challenges that states still face. The report contains three major sections. Section 2 summarizes the state survey, Section 3 describes the latest best practices, and Section 4 identifies lingering gaps in state rail planning and potential improvements.



Figure 1-1. Denver Union Station

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Section 2—Survey of State Rail Planning Officials

Twenty state rail planning officials participated in the survey during the summer of 2013 and provided valuable insights on their experiences and observations.

Why did your state develop its most recent state rail plan?

States developed state rail plans to qualify for High-Speed Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) programs and to improve comprehensive multimodal planning.

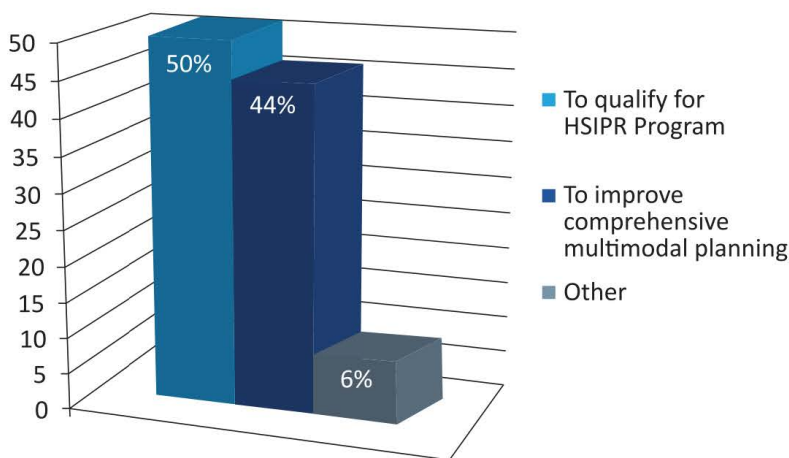


Figure 2-1. Motivation for Developing State Rail Plan

Who developed your most recent state rail plan?

Most states relied on a combination of consultants and agency staff to develop the state rail plan.

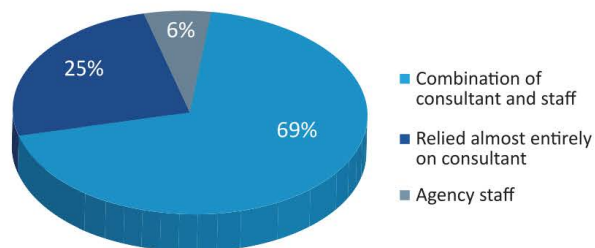


Figure 2-2. Who Developed State Rail Plan

How did you fund the development of your state rail plan?

The majority of surveyed states utilized a combination of state and federal funding to pay for the plan.

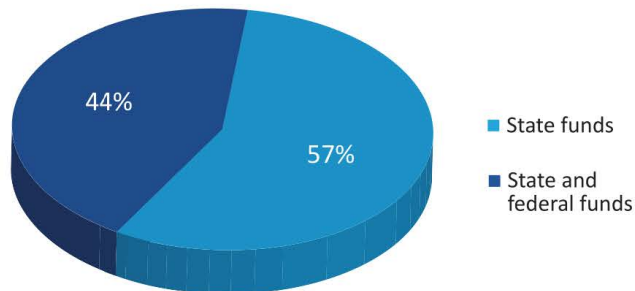


Figure 2-3. Funding Development of State Rail Plan

What are the principal data sources informing the state rail plan?

Data from freight railroads, including empirical and qualitative data, are the single most important source of data for the current generation of state rail plans, followed by STB and Amtrak data.

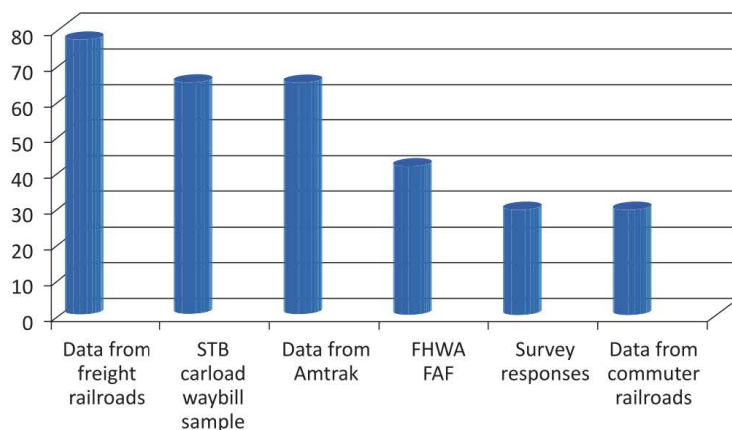


Figure 2-4. State Rail Plan Data Sources

“We are incorporating more passenger rail data and information.”

—State DOT Respondent

What are the most important issues in state rail planning?

Rail funding, project lists/prioritization, coordination, and multimodal/economic issues are the most important issues in state rail planning.

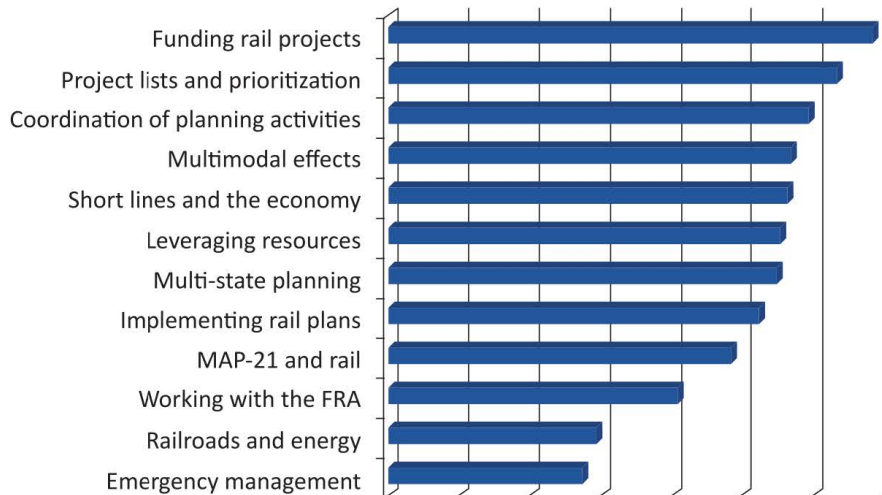


Figure 2-5. Most Important Issues in State Rail Planning

How has state rail planning changed since PRIIA?

Rail planning has become more comprehensive, oriented toward passenger rail, and focused on funding and implementation.

Since PRIIA, state rail planning has become more:

- Comprehensive.
- Oriented to passenger rail operations.
- Focused on capital planning and prioritization.
- Reflective of broad stakeholder outreach.
- Customized to unique state circumstances.

“This has become a much higher-level policy issue. It is not a simple compilation of inventory. We have developed visions, goals, and programs to the extent possible.”

—State DOT Respondent

What were the greatest challenges you faced in developing your state rail plan?

State rail agencies grappled with institutional challenges, data scarcity, and prioritization approaches, among other major obstacles.

What was difficult?	Why?
Staffing the rail plan	• Loss of institutional knowledge with retirements of rail-focused staff across many states. • Limited staff knowledge of rail issues. • Limited time given other staff responsibilities. – Rail activities are divided between several divisions (e.g. public transportation, highways [Section 130], multimodal planning).
Finding funding for the plan	• Difficult to assemble funding from state and federal sources.
Prioritizing projects	• Private railroad priorities change constantly. • Railroad's planning horizon is shorter term (e.g. 5-year program) versus states (5 to 30 years). • Priorities of the state may be different from freight railroads.
Data acquisition and integration	• Freight rail demand and operations data is difficult to obtain and apply. • Integrating freight and passenger data has proven difficult.
PRIIA compliance (for states that do not operate or own assets)	• The challenge of complying with PRIIA without appearing to advocate for passenger rail in states that do not own or operate any rail or where there is political opposition.
Coordination with other plans	• Difficult to synchronize with state Long Range Transportation Plan, MAP-21 Statewide Freight Plan.
Coordination of public outreach	• Developing a common vision among multiple stakeholders. • Engaging rail users (passenger and especially shippers).
Predicting the future	• Understanding future freight flows and the state's role in helping freight railroads to be better positioned for future demands.

How did you overcome your challenges in developing your state rail plan?

State rail agencies overcame challenges by working harder and smarter, and by leveraging skills and talents from other agency divisions.

Challenge	Examples of state ingenuity and grit (State DOT responses)
Staffing the rail plan	"We borrowed staff from the Planning Section to assist with the rail plan (project management and process expertise—even though they did not know rail)."
Finding funding for the plan	Combining state and federal funds and leveraging staff.
Prioritizing projects	"Prioritized short-term projects and developed strategies for longer-term needs."
Data acquisition and integration	"Reliance on a consultant team with national freight railroad experience."
PRIIA compliance (for states that do not operate or own assets)	"Did the best we could with what [data] was available."
Coordination with other plans	"Rail staff was a part of the technical review of the long-range plan. We held separate public meetings but coordinated dates so that we did not overlap too closely."
Coordination of public outreach	"We had an advisory committee composed of our major stakeholders, which we found effective. Also had an extensive outreach program both for the general public and interest groups such as corridor governing groups and regional planning agencies."
Predicting the future	Relying on available data and best judgment of state and rail stakeholders.



Figure 2-6. Philadelphia 30th Street Station



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Section 3—Best Practices

The best practices highlighted in this report are based on a careful analysis of publicly available state rail plans. The plans fall into several categories, as shown in the figure below: 1) PRIIA plan complete; 2) PRIIA plan underway; 3) pre-PRIIA plan; 4) no state rail plan. By the end of 2015, 46 of 50 states plus the District of Columbia will have developed a state rail plan that follows PRIIA.

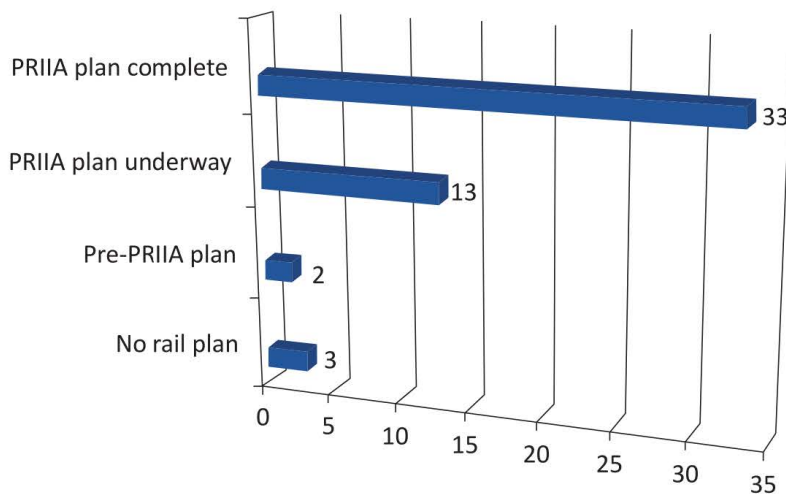


Figure 3-1. Status of State Rail Plans

What is easy in state rail planning (low-hanging fruit)?

Compiling existing information from reports and public data sources, and developing passenger project lists are the easiest chores of state rail planners.

What is easy?	Why?
Developing inventory of existing conditions	System data is readily available from railroads.
Safety analysis	Safety data is readily available from FRA.
Compiling past studies	Available and familiar to state rail planners.
Developing passenger project lists	Amtrak and commuter railroads provide detailed project information; public agencies depend on funding from state and are accustomed to sharing.

3.1 Outreach

In developing the latest generation of state rail plans, agencies have significantly expanded their efforts to engage rail stakeholders and the general public. Almost every published rail plan contains a section that articulates an outreach strategy and how that strategy was executed. Outreach plans encourage interaction with the freight railroads (Class I and short line carriers); passenger railroads (Amtrak and commuters); and rail users including shippers and passengers.

Outreach Best Practices

- Identify stakeholders:
 - Carriers (freight, passenger)
 - Freight shippers and terminals
 - Passengers and stations
 - Government (state and local)
 - General public
- Develop information resources:
 - Project summaries, websites, other documents
 - Updates on status and outcomes
- Conduct targeted outreach matching the activity to the audience:
 - For example, web surveys to allow for broad public comment
 - Shipper interviews
 - Carrier needs surveys
 - Public meetings and open houses (in person and web based)
- A mechanism to allow for continuous feedback (web-based submission form)
- Distill strategic meaning from findings and integrate into the state rail plan goals, prioritization, and implementation

The best outreach efforts are designed with an end in mind. Illinois, for example, developed a Stakeholder Involvement Plan (SIP) with the following goals/guiding principles:

- Proactive outreach to stakeholders,
- Early and continuous community participation,
- Reasonable access to information in clear, jargon-free language,
- Opportunity for public comment prior to key decisions, and
- Focus stakeholder participation on decisions.

These goals enabled Illinois to execute its SIP with success, yielding valuable information to help focus the rail plan development on expanding passenger rail, improving reliability, and other key interest areas of outreach participants.

Successful outreach efforts are customized to fit the unique needs of their state. For example, the Nevada DOT formed two technical advisory committees to correspond with