



**THE GREAT LAKES LIMITED:
A Proposal for a Daytime Passenger Train Between Detroit
and New York City**



Source: Amtrak

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INTRODUCTION

One of Amtrak's strongest performing long-distance trains is the Lake Shore Limited between Chicago and New York City. It's not surprising, because this train connects the two biggest megaregions in the country, both in terms of population and geographic area: The Northeast Megaregion and the Great Lakes Megaregion.

Unfortunately, west of Buffalo, the train operates in the wee hours, leaving densely populated northern Ohio served in the middle of the night and Erie, Pennsylvania with only the eastbound train offering a reasonable station time. Despite this, ridership on the Lakeshore Limited is the highest in Amtrak's long-distance network. The train carries the equivalent of more than six full Boeing 737 planes every day. Each year, more than 35,000 passengers board/alight in Cleveland and over 27,000 in Toledo. In upstate New York, Empire Corridor trains frequently sell out. Clearly, there is strong demand for train service along this route. The Corridor also lacks a good morning departure from Albany westbound, an afternoon departure from Buffalo eastbound, and the ability to do same-day round trips between several city pairs between Albany and Buffalo.

Ohio's situation is particularly acute. It has lost more Amtrak service over the past half-century than any state except perhaps Florida. Daylight service is sorely needed, not just to meet demand but to show residents and state legislators what daylight train service looks like and what it can offer. Ohio sits in a key geographic position between Chicago and the East Coast, but the state has long been reluctant to invest in more trains. Part of the reason for this is the middle-of-the-night service which makes passenger rail an abstract idea, fueling the reluctance in the Legislature to view it as a transportation mode worthy of investment.

Amtrak has not helped. Years of chronic under-funding by Congress and repeated threats by Congress and some presidents over the years to eliminate Amtrak altogether has led to a siege mentality at the company and a reluctance to consider expansion anywhere outside of the Northeast Corridor that does not involve state investment.

It's time for a new paradigm that involves a more proactive approach. Amtrak's enabling legislation does not explicitly prohibit the company from adding long-distance service; however, Congress would have to appropriate funding for new trains. Amtrak can and should become a champion of frequency expansions along current long-distance routes and of new routes where they make the most sense. Advocates need to be more proactive too, organizing congressional support along such routes.

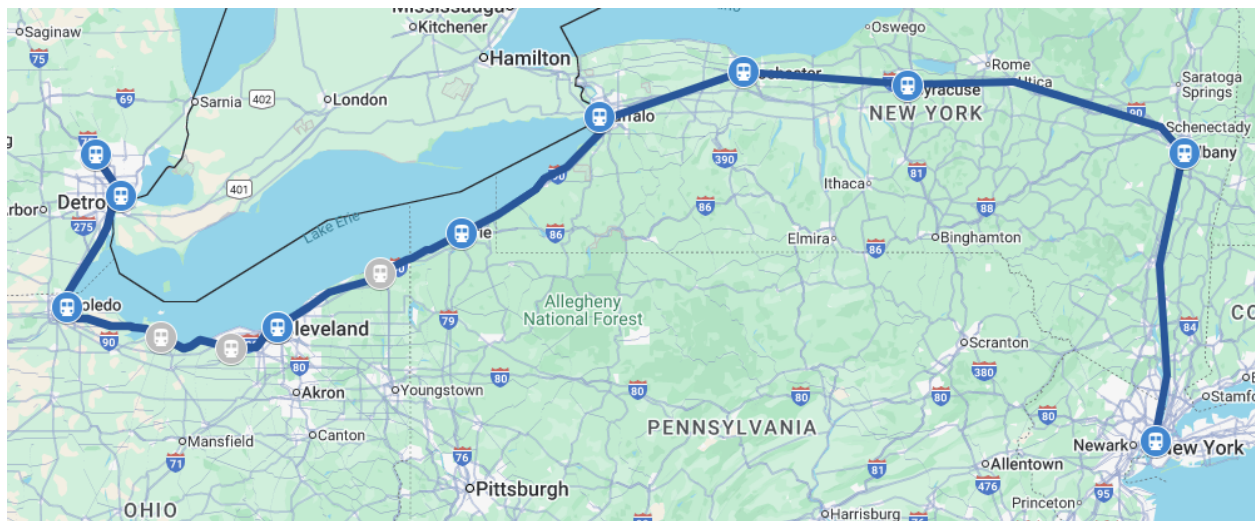
One such long-distance route where expansion makes sense is the Lake Shore Limited; however, expansion between Chicago and Ohio is not possible until a new passenger-only bypass is built between Porter, Indiana and Chicago to get passenger trains off of congested freight tracks, other options are needed. The best option for adding a long-distance frequency along a substantial portion of the Lake Shore Limited route is to add a day train between Detroit and New York City via Toledo, Cleveland, and Erie, Pennsylvania. The Lakeshore Rail Alliance proposes such a train, which we will call The Great Lakes Limited.

WHAT IS THE GREAT LAKES LIMITED?

The Great Lakes Limited would be a day train between Detroit and New York City that would travel on the route of the Lake Shore Limited from Toledo eastward. It would have morning departures, late-evening arrivals in New York and Detroit, and operate on a schedule of approximately 16 hours. No part of the train would operate overnight. Northern Ohio and Erie, PA would have daylight service in both directions.

There is precedent for this type of service with the New York-Savannah “Palmetto”, which is an Amtrak-funded long-distance service of 830 miles. The New York-Detroit train would be about 800 miles. Detroit-New York has high on-line population. The train would operate through an area that could be called a transportation desert. There are few alternatives to the auto in this region, except between the largest cities. This is a market where Amtrak could excel.

See the conceptual timetable on the next page to get an idea of what the service could look like. The actual timetable would depend upon Amtrak’s operational needs and negotiations with host railroads.



Great Lakes Limited Route Map

Great Lakes Limited				
			Station	
Read Down ↓	Read Down ↓			Read Up ↑
Option 1	Option 2			
5:45A	8:45A		New York	11:30P
6:25A	9:25A		Croton-Harmon	10:50P
7:05A	10:05A		Poughkeepsie	10:10P
7:55A	10:55A	AR	Albany-Rensselaer	DP 9:20P
8:20A	11:20A	DP	Albany-Rensselaer	AR 8:55P
8:44A	11:44A		Schenectady	8:30P
10:14A	1:14P		Utica	7:00P
11:30A	2:30P		Syracuse	5:45P
12:50P	3:50P		Rochester	4:25P
1:30P	4:30P	AR	Buffalo-Depew	DP 3:45P
1:40P	4:40P	DP	Buffalo-Depew	AR 3:55P
2:20P	5:20P		(Dunkirk*)	2:55P
3:10P	6:10P		Erie	2:05P
3:45P	6:45P		(Ashtabula*)	1:30P
4:25P	7:25P		(Mentor*)	12:50P
4:55P	7:55P	AR	Cleveland	DP 12:20P
5:00P	8:00P	DP	Cleveland	AR 12:15P
5:30P	8:30P		(Elyria**)	11:45A
6:15P	9:15P		(Sandusky**)	11:00A
7:10P	10:10P	AR	Toledo	10:05A
7:15P	10:15	DP	Toledo	10:00A
8:30P	11:30P	AR	Detroit	DP 8:45A
8:45P	11:45P	DP	Detroit	AR 8:30A
9:25P	12:25A		Pontiac	7:50A
Amtrak Thruway Bus Connections				
5:15P	8:15P		Cleveland – Lakefront Station (To/From Buffalo and NYC)	11:15A
5:55P	8:55P		Akron – RKP Transit Center	10:30A
6:30P	9:30P		Canton – Cornerstone Transit Center	9:55A
2:25P	5:25P		Canton – Cornerstone Transit Center	2:00P
3:00P	6:00P		Akron – RKP Transit Center	1:25P
3:55P	6:55P		Cleveland – Lakefront Station (to/from TOL/DET)	12:35P
5:15P	8:15P		Cleveland – Lakefront Station	11:15A
7:15P	10:20P		Columbus – Herrick Dr. Transit Hub	9:15A
1:45P	4:45P		Pittsburgh – Grant Street Transportation Center	2:50P
3:55P	6:55P		Cleveland – Lakefront Station (To/From TOL/DET)	12:40P
3:25P	6:25P		Erie – Amtrak Station	1:15P
5:30P	8:30P		Pittsburgh – Grant Transportation Center	11:05A

*New station required, including dual-track platforms

**Station requires dual-track platforms before this city can be served.



Great Lakes Limited (in blue) with Amtrak Thruway Bus Connections (in green)

WHY THE GREAT LAKES LIMITED MAKES SENSE

1. Michigan has long wanted passenger rail service to the east. This train would likely lead to interest in an application for Corridor ID funds for the entire Detroit-Toledo-Cleveland-Erie-Buffalo corridor, possibly jointly with Ohio.
2. In New York, Empire Corridor trains between New York City and Buffalo frequently sell out. Current schedules do not offer a morning departure from Albany westward or an afternoon departure from Buffalo eastward. They also do not allow for same-day round trips between most city pairs between Albany and Buffalo. The Great Lakes Limited would help address these issues.
3. It would allow for greater connectivity for future corridors, including the Cleveland-Columbus-Dayton-Cincinnati (3C+D), Cleveland-Pittsburgh, Cleveland-Buffalo, Columbus-Toledo-Detroit, and Cleveland-Chicago. It would also make a local Canton-Akron-Cleveland train much more viable by offering connections to these cities.
4. While some infrastructure improvements may be needed for this train they would also be needed also for future Detroit-Toledo-Cleveland, Cleveland-Buffalo, and Empire Corridors.
5. The train would enjoy a direct connection to the Cleveland RTA's Waterfront line during daylight hours and strengthen the case for a new Lakefront Station.
6. Since the train will operate on a densely populated and densely traveled corridor that, in Ohio, has no daylight service, it will be heavily patronized. Current Ohio ridership on the Lakeshore Limited is heavy, despite its lousy station times.
7. No new layover facilities would be needed as such facilities already exist near Detroit in Pontiac and New York.
8. With new Airo trainsets coming online over the next couple of years, Amfleet equipment will be freed up for the service.
9. The train could operate without new stations; however, if Mentor, Ashtabula, and/or Dunkirk want stops, new stations with dual-track platforms would be necessary. It may also be necessary to upgrade the Sandusky and Elyria stations with dual-track platforms.
10. With the right schedule, only two sets of equipment may be needed.
11. Since revenues have fallen faster than costs every time in Amtrak's history that it has cut long-distance trains, the Great Lakes Limited will strengthen the financial performance of all of the other Amtrak trains that overlap this route by sharing fixed costs and company overhead.
12. At a recent [Amtrak board](#) meeting, Chief Commercial Officer Eliot Hamlisch said that on some long distance routes, adding a frequency might improve Amtrak's bottom line. We believe the Lake Shore Limited is one of these routes.

JUST THE BEGINNING

We must consider the addition of this train to be just the beginning. The reality is that the Lake Shore Limited route is dense enough to have a lot of passenger rail service. It should be the platform for pushing for more state investment in short-distance corridors like Detroit-Toledo-Cleveland, the 3C+D, Cleveland-Pittsburgh, Cleveland-Buffalo, and Canton-Akron-Cleveland, more federal investment in long-distance service, and even European-style high-speed rail. Frequent long-distance service overlayed on short distance corridors is essential to maximize the benefit of passenger rail investments by extending the reach of short-distance corridors and offering more one-seat ride options. These long-distance services would include more Detroit-NYC round trips and, eventually, more Chicago-NYC round trips once the South-of-the-Lake Bypass is completed. Some of these frequencies should go to Boston as well.

CONCLUSION

Ghandi said “Be the change you wish to see.” It is clear that Amtrak will have to drive the agenda when it comes to Ohio if we are to unlock state investment in passenger rail. We realize this is a departure from past policy, but necessity demands change. By becoming an agent of change, Amtrak would generate a lot of goodwill in Congress and state governments. We would go so far as to say that it’s in its own interest to be seen as relevant in these uncertain times. This is no time to be passive. Amtrak must lead. It will gain many supporters if it does.

As for the advocacy community, it is important to recognize that we must broaden our efforts beyond just the state-driven approach if we are to succeed in bringing new service to the southern Great Lakes Region as a whole. Lakeshore Rail Alliance members should contact their respective governors, U.S. senators, and those state legislators and U.S. House members whose districts overlap this route regarding this proposal. We should push for the federal funding necessary, including infrastructure improvements, to make this train a reality and achieve a 90% on-time performance rate. Local governments and MPOs should be approached as well.

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