FALL 2026
MRA RAIL UPDATE
A PUBLICATION OF THE MICHIGAN RAILROADS ASSOCIATION



BUILT IN MICHIGAN. MOVED BY RAIL.

Michigan is the birthplace of the modern automotive industry, and freight rail has been part of that story from the beginning. Railroads' involvement in the automotive industry dates back to the early 1900s and Henry Ford's innovative Highland Park, Michigan, assembly plant.

As demand for new automobiles grew, railroads designed railcars specifically to move automobiles, increasing the number of autos carried per railcar from two to ten or more.

Today, freight railroads continue to connect Michigan's automotive supply chain to markets across North America. From moving raw materials and steel to manufacturers, to delivering auto parts to assembly plants and transporting finished vehicles, rail plays an essential role in getting Michigan-made automobiles to consumers.

No matter where plants are located, the rail network remains a backbone of the automotive supply chain. Freight rail is involved in all stages of auto manufacturing – from moving the iron ore and coke needed to make steel to delivering semi-finished goods to manufacturing plants, moving finished parts, and transporting final vehicles.



Lake State Railway and XCel Properties load new Chevrolet trucks in Flint onto autoracks to ship out of state. *Photo Credit: LSRC/XCel.*

EACH YEAR, FREIGHT RAIL MOVES NEARLY 75% OF THE NEW CARS AND LIGHT TRUCKS PURCHASED IN THE UNITED STATES.

Long before a finished car hits the road, it begins as raw materials – including plastic, metals and sheets of glass – which railroads move to manufacturers to be turned into the roughly 30,000 individual parts that make up a modern vehicle, from bolts to dashboards. Railroads then move these auto parts to vehicle assembly plants before finally transporting finished vehicles across North America.

A single train can move hundreds of vehicles at once. In a typical year, U.S. Class I railroads carry 1.8 million carloads of motor vehicles and parts. Railroads also transport some of the biggest and heaviest automotive components, including car frames, engines, transmissions and axles.

- **Steel:** An average car contains 2,400 pounds of steel, used in car frames, door panels, support

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Jon Cool, President
@MI_FreightRail

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

As we head into the fall, I'm pleased to share another issue of the Michigan Railroads Association newsletter.

There is a lot happening across Michigan's freight rail industry, and this issue highlights several examples of the important work being done by Michigan's freight rail carriers and our industry partners.

One of the themes we focus on is the important role freight railroads play in supporting Michigan's automotive industry. Rail remains an essential part of moving vehicles, parts and other products that are critical to Michigan's manufacturing economy.

Our Moving Michigan featured member in this issue is Genesee & Wyoming Railroad Company. We appreciate the opportunity to highlight the company and the important role its railroads play in Michigan with its 6 railroads operating across our state.

We also look back at CN's special 250th USA

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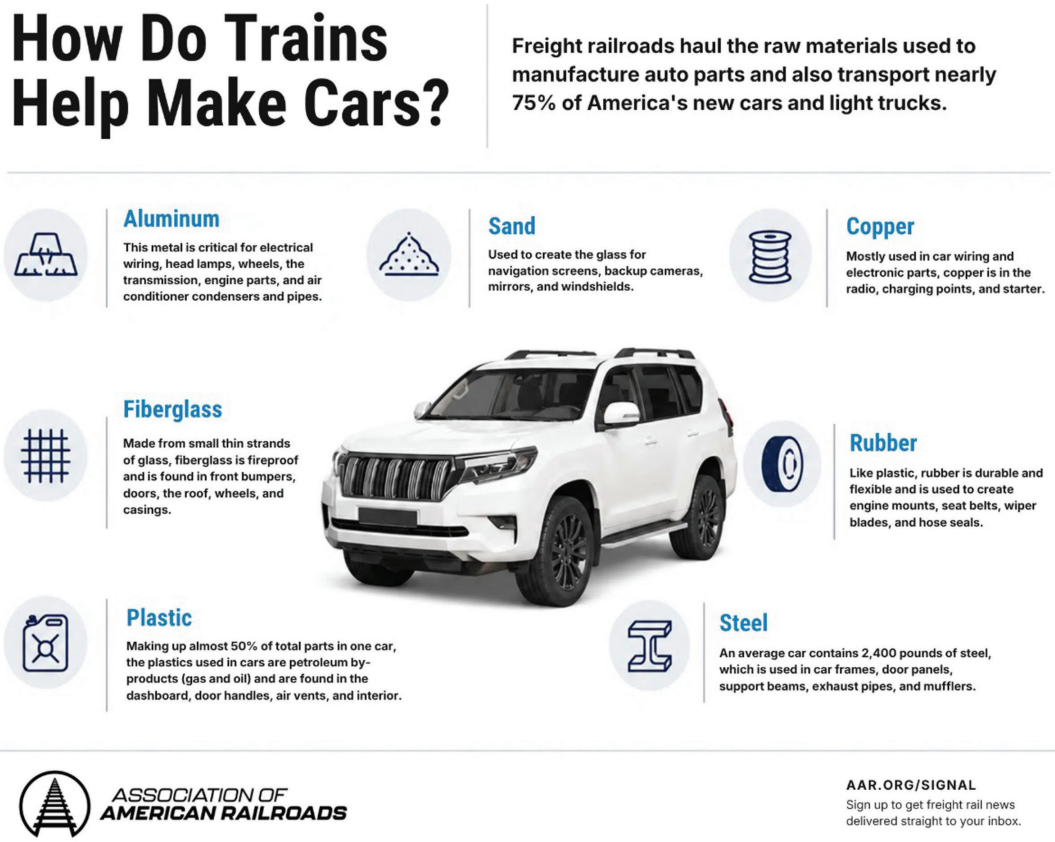
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beams, exhaust pipes and mufflers.

- **Plastic & Rubber:** Nearly 50% of a car's total parts include materials used in dashboards, door handles, air vents and interiors. Rubber is also used in engine mounts, seat belts, wiper blades and hose seals.
- **Copper:** Used primarily in vehicle wiring and electronic components, including radios, charging systems and starters.
- **Sand:** Used to create glass for navigation screens, backup cameras, mirrors and windshields.
- **Aluminum:** Critical for electrical wiring, headlamps, wheels, transmissions, engine parts and air-conditioning components.
- **Fiberglass:** Made from small, thin strands of glass, fiberglass is fire-resistant and can be found in bumpers, doors, roofs, wheels and casings.



MICHIGAN'S AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY IS CONNECTED BY RAIL

Michigan's automotive industry has deep and continuing connections to the freight rail network. The 2026 AAR Automotive Facility Guide lists nine automotive rail loading and unloading facility locations in Michigan.

Rail also connects Michigan's manufacturers with the broader North American automotive market. CN reports that one in four automobiles built in Michigan moves on its rail network, demonstrating the continuing importance of freight rail to the state's automotive economy.

The North American auto industry includes manufacturing facilities throughout the continent, and railroads serve most of the 70-plus automobile manufacturing plants across North America. Railroads move large volumes over long distances safely and reliably, helping manufacturers connect major production facilities with suppliers and customers across the continent.

RAILROADS ARE INVESTING TO MAXIMIZE EFFICIENCY AND MEET CUSTOMER NEEDS

To meet the demand for pristine automobile delivery, railroads invest in new autoracks – railcars designed specifically for delivering finished vehicles. This includes traditional and adaptable designs that can convert from two to three levels to accommodate diverse vehicle types and changing consumer preferences.

They have also invested millions of dollars in facilities designed to handle automobiles, along with new technologies that support the seamless movement of vehicles.

Michigan helped build the modern automotive industry, and freight rail has helped move it from the beginning. Today, rail remains essential to Michigan's automotive supply chain – moving raw materials, parts and finished vehicles at scale and connecting Michigan manufacturers to markets across North America.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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Whistle Stop tour, which made stops in East Lansing, Durand and Flat Rock. We were honored to welcome CN's CEO Tracy Robinson and other CN leadership. Special thanks to Congressman Tom Barrett, Congresswoman Debbie Dingell and many state legislators for being a part of these events.

Safety and training are also featured in this issue. The Michigan State Police Hazardous Materials Training Facility outside of Lansing recently completed an expansion that will provide additional classroom and locker room space and improve the experience for first responders who train there.

This nationally respected facility is an important resource for first responders in Michigan and the Midwest.

We also highlight Rail Safety Week activities at Michigan State University and Kalamazoo, including discussions with students, law enforcement and others about rail safety and the many career opportunities available throughout the railroad industry.

Finally, with the remaining days of the legislative session in Lansing, we continue to support bipartisan cargo theft legislation sponsored by Reps. Mike Harris and Steve Frisbie. We appreciate the House's bipartisan support earlier this year and hope to see these common-sense bills receive Senate votes and reach the Governor's desk for signature.

Thank you for your continued support of Michigan's freight rail industry. I hope you enjoy this issue.

MOVING MICHIGAN FEATURING

G&W RAILROADS CONNECT MICHIGAN INDUSTRIES TO NEW MARKETS AND OPPORTUNITIES

From the agricultural communities of the Thumb to the manufacturing centers of western Michigan, businesses across the state depend on reliable transportation networks to connect them with customers and suppliers throughout North America.

Helping make those connections every day are Genesee & Wyoming's (G&W) six Michigan short line freight railroads.

Together, Grand Rapids Eastern Railroad (GR), Huron and Eastern Railway (HESR), Indiana & Ohio Railway (IORY), Marquette Rail (MQT), Michigan Shore Railroad (MS), and Mid-Michigan Railroad (MMRR) operate nearly 700 miles of track across the state, employ more than 100 local residents, and serve key industries including agriculture, chemicals and plastics, energy, and food products.

Collectively, their annual freight traffic removes the equivalent of roughly 178,000 truckloads from Michigan roads and highways each year.

Their mission to provide safe, efficient and reliable transportation service every day can be seen in projects happening across Michigan today, from opening new international markets for agricultural producers to supporting major industrial expansions that strengthen regional supply chains.



The Huron & Eastern Railway hauls freight in the Thumb Region. *Photo credit: G&W.*

One of the most significant recent developments occurred on Huron and Eastern Railway, whose 331-mile network stretches across Michigan's Thumb region and serves one of the country's most productive agricultural areas.

The railroad recently launched a new cross-border service known as the America's Harvest Rail Route in partnership with Canadian National, G&W's CG Railway rail-ferry joint venture, and Mexican carrier Grupo México Transportes. The service creates a seamless rail connection between Michigan agricultural shippers and customers throughout Mexico.

The route is particularly important for Michigan's dry edible bean industry. Michigan ranks among the nation's leading dry edible bean-producing states, and much of that production originates in communities located along HESR's network.

The new service is designed to move black, kidney, pinto, and navy beans to growing consumer markets in central and southern Mexico, creating new opportunities for farmers, processors, and exporters throughout the state.

The route also demonstrates how today's short line railroads do far more than move freight locally. By combining HESR's agricultural reach, CN's network access, and CG Railway's unique rail-ferry service between Mobile, Alabama, and Coatzacoalcos, Mexico, the partnership offers customers an efficient alternative to traditional border crossings while reducing transit complexity and expanding market access.

"Mexico represents a significant and expanding destination for U.S. agricultural products, and this new partnership enables shippers to reach those markets in a safe, efficient and cost-effective way," said Mark Nagy, director of sales and marketing for HESR.



The Grand Rapids Eastern Railroad pulls freight in West Michigan. *Photo credit: G&W.*

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G&W RAILROADS CONNECT MICHIGAN INDUSTRIES TO NEW MARKETS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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"By bringing together trusted partners across North America, HESR is helping ensure that Michigan-grown products move confidently from origin to consumption markets well beyond the U.S."

On the opposite side of the state, Grand Rapids Eastern Railroad is demonstrating how strategic rail investments can support growth for Michigan manufacturers and food producers.

When King Milling announced a $42 million expansion of its Lowell facility in 2022, including construction of a fourth flour mill, the project represented a major investment in one of Michigan's most important food-processing operations.

As the state's largest flour miller, King Milling depends heavily on rail transportation, receiving approximately 1,500 inbound railcars of wheat annually from across the country. For a business operating at that scale, dependable rail service is essential.

To support the expansion, GR partnered with Michigan's Rail Enhancement Program on a $5 million rail infrastructure project that resulted in a comprehensive rehabilitation of the railroad between Grand Rapids and Lowell.

Completed in late 2025, the project restored operating speeds, improved safety, increased capacity, and created a more efficient track configuration for moving railcars through the area.

Working closely with King Milling, GR helped design improvements that would support future growth while addressing longstanding operational challenges. The project also paved the way for an additional unloading pit that will significantly increase throughput and reduce unloading times.

As a result of the expansion and supporting rail investments, King Milling can now produce as much as 800,000 pounds of flour per day, strengthening both Michigan's agricultural economy and regional food supply chain.

And the impact extends far beyond a single customer. The improvements are expected to generate approximately 450 additional annual railcar loads, improve service reliability for other GR customers, reduce fuel consumption and emissions, and lower delays for motorists at grade crossings.

"These investments are strengthening supply chains, providing jobs, supporting local businesses and enhancing freight efficiency across the region," said G&W Assistant Vice President of Sales and Marketing Sarah Pawlanta.

And at Marquette Rail, which serves western Michigan communities from Grand Rapids to Manistee and Ludington, they are investing in the future of western Michigan through a major infrastructure improvement initiative centered on its Ludington Yard and mainline network.

In 2024, the City of Ludington, MQT, and the Michigan Department of Transportation partnered on a $25.2 million application for a Federal Railroad Administration Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant that will rehabilitate approximately 31 miles of track, replace more than 56,000 ties, modernize yard infrastructure, and restore the railroad to a long-term state of good repair.

The project is designed to improve safety, reduce derailment risk, increase capacity, and strengthen service to customers moving products such as chemicals, forest products, agricultural commodities, and manufactured goods.

Because MQT provides the only rail connection between Ludington, Manistee, and the national rail network through Grand Rapids, the improvements would help preserve a critical transportation link for western Michigan industries while positioning the region for future economic development opportunities. The project is under construction in the summer of 2026.

While HESR, GR and MQT provide two recent examples of rail-driven growth, similar opportunities exist throughout G&W's Michigan network.

Michigan Shore Railroad connects customers along the Lake Michigan shoreline from Holland to Fremont. Mid-Michigan Railroad provides service in the state's central region, and Indiana & Ohio Railway extends G&W's reach into southeastern Michigan. Together, these railroads connect customers to Class I carriers, rail-to-truck transload facilities, ports, and markets across North America and overseas.

They also play an important role in economic development. Rail-served industrial sites, transload facilities, and strategic transportation connections give manufacturers, agricultural processors, and logistics providers more options when evaluating where to expand or invest.

As Michigan continues to compete for new manufacturing, food processing, and industrial investment, freight rail remains a critical piece of the equation. Through infrastructure improvements, innovative transportation solutions, and close collaboration with customers, G&W's Michigan railroads are helping businesses reach new markets, strengthen supply chains, and create opportunities for future growth.



The Marquette Railroad moves commodities between Ludington and Grand Rapids. *Photo credit: G&W.*

FREIGHT RAIL INDUSTRY PARTNERS WITH LOCAL RESPONDERS FOR HAZMAT TRAINING IN BLISSFIELD

Railroads don't just move freight through Michigan communities – they work with those communities to prepare for the unexpected.

That commitment was on display in Blissfield in August, when Norfolk Southern brought its Operation Awareness & Response (OAR) Safety Train to the Adrian & Blissfield Railroad for three days of hands-on hazardous materials and railroad emergency-response training. The Aug. 18-20 program provided local emergency responders with an opportunity to work directly with locomotives, tank cars and other railroad equipment while practicing the skills and procedures needed to respond to a potential rail emergency.

The training covered a range of railroad safety and emergency-response topics, including rail equipment and tank-car identification, tank-car valves and fittings, railroad emergency procedures, locomotive emergencies and the use of rail shipping information. Norfolk Southern describes its Safety Train as a mobile training platform designed to give first responders practical experience with the equipment they could encounter during an actual incident.

The three-day exercise brought together multiple local fire departments and other emergency-response organizations from throughout Lenawee County. Participating agencies included Blissfield Township, Addison, Adrian, Fairfield Township, Palmyra Township, Madison Township, Riga and Adrian Township fire departments, along with county emergency-management and HazMat personnel, law enforcement, Michigan State Police and other public- and private-sector partners.

Norfolk Southern Regional Vice President of Government Relations Herbert Smith participated in the event, while Chris Bagwell, president of the Adrian & Blissfield Railroad, represented the host short line. The Adrian & Blissfield Railroad recognized the teamwork among Norfolk Southern, local responders, the Michigan Railroads Association and state officials following the training.



From left: Chris Bagwell, President, Adrian Blissfield RR, Rep Nancy Jenkins-Arno, Herbert Smith, Govt Affairs Manager, NS, John Rittig, Manager - Hazardous Materials, NS, and Scott Deustch, Regional Manager – Hazardous Materials, NS. *Photo Credit: MRA.*

State Rep. Nancy Jenkins-Arno also toured the Norfolk Southern Safety Train and observed the training. Her visit provided an opportunity to see firsthand how freight railroads work with local communities and emergency responders to strengthen preparedness.

The Blissfield training is part of a much broader railroad-industry commitment to emergency preparedness. Norfolk Southern operates its Safety Train at locations across its 22-state network and works with local emergency agencies to develop training ranging from basic railroad response to advanced HazMat instruction and full-scale exercises. The railroad reported training more than 5,500 first responders in 2024.

Similar training opportunities are conducted by railroads and industry partners across Michigan and throughout the nation each year. For freight railroads, safety extends beyond the tracks and equipment – it also means building relationships with the firefighters, police officers, emergency managers, HazMat teams and other first responders who are part of the communities served by America's freight rail network.

The Blissfield exercise demonstrated the value of that partnership: when railroads and first responders train together before an incident occurs, they are better prepared to work together when a community needs them most.



Rep. Nancy Jenkins-Arno receives a briefing on rail tanker car safety training in Blissfield, MI, Aug 20, 2026. *Photo Credit: MRA.*



From left: Chris Bagwell, Rep Nancy Jenkins-Arno, Jon Cool. *Photo Credit: A&B.*



From left: Jeff Price, Manager, U.S. Public and Government Affairs CN, Ben Waineo, Automotive Account Manager CN, Randy Saint John, Police Officer, CN, and Jon Cool, President, MRA. *Photo Credit MSU.*

MSU STUDENTS HEAR ABOUT RAILROAD SAFETY AND CAREERS



Jon Cool, MRA President, speaks with MSU students. *Photo Credit: MSU.*

Michigan State University students had an opportunity to learn more about railroad safety and career opportunities in the railroad industry during an event at the Broad College of Business on September 21.

Held in conjunction with Rail Safety Week, the event highlighted the importance of railroad safety and the many ways students can build careers in the rail industry. While railroads are often associated with engineers and train crews, the industry offers a wide range of professional opportunities, including business, logistics, data, technology, communications, finance, human resources, operations, engineering and management.

The event provided MSU students with an opportunity to learn about the industry, connect with railroad professionals and gain a better understanding of the important role railroads play in Michigan and the national economy.

Rail Safety Week provided an ideal opportunity to introduce students to both the importance of rail safety and the career possibilities available across the railroad industry.



Jason Murray, VP - Right of Way Services, RailPros and Evelyn Reyna, Talent Acquisition Coordinator, RailPros, speak with an MSU student about a career in the railroad industry. *Photo credit: MSU.*



Sean Pengelly of the Lake State Railway explains the various engineering disciplines required in the railroad industry. *Photo credit: MSU.*



Michele Malski of SPRING recruiting speaks with MSU students about a railroad career. *Photo credit: MSU.*

CN'S USA 250 LOCOMOTIVE TOUR MAKES MICHIGAN STOPS

Canadian National Railway (CN) brought its USA 250 locomotive celebration to Michigan in August, with Whistle Stop events in East Lansing, Durand and Flat Rock commemorating the 250th anniversary of the United States.

The tour showcased CN's specially decorated USA 250 locomotives, celebrating America's history and the important role railroads have played in connecting communities, supporting industry, and contributing to the nation's economic development.

CN CEO Tracy Robinson, Chief Operating Officer Patrick White, and Vice President of Mechanical Nick Clark participated in the Michigan events, highlighting the significance of the celebration and CN's commitment to engaging with the communities along its network.

The East Lansing event featured remarks from Congressman Tom Barrett and Michigan State University President Kevin Guskiewicz. Congresswoman Debbie Dingell spoke at the Flat Rock event.

We appreciate all those who spoke and attended this special event. Thank you also to the many state legislators who attended.

CN's whistle-stop tour brought the USA 250 celebration directly to communities along its Michigan network, honoring the nation's past while recognizing the people, infrastructure, and transportation connections that will help shape its future.



From left: CN's Patrick Marshall, Senior Manager, U.S. Federal Government Affairs, Cong. Debbie Dingell, and CN's Andrea Niethold, Head of U.S. Public and Government Affairs. *Photo Credit: CN.*



CN's USA 250th locomotives heading eastbound through Lansing Aug 18, 2026. *Photo Credit: Brian Caswell.*



Congressman Tom Barrett addresses the crowd at the East Lansing CN 250th Whistle Stop event. *Photo Credit: MSU.*



From left, Michigan State President Kevin Guskiewicz, CN CEO Tracy Robinson, Cong. Tom Barrett at the CN 250th Whistle Stop in East Lansing. *Photo Credit: MSU.*

CN's Nick Clark, VP of Mechanical, speaks at the Durand Whistle Stop. *Photo Credit: CN.*





Conductor Tommy McMullen of the Great Lakes Central Railroad. *Photo credit: Watco.*

CONDUCTOR PULLS WOMAN FROM BURNING CAR

Conductor Tommy McMullen left for work on the morning of May 27 thinking it would be a regular day on the Great Lakes Central Railroad (GLC). He ended up working his regular shift but saved a life along the way.

McMullen was driving on M-71, a two-lane state highway, near Corunna, Michigan, around 6:30 a.m. He was heading to the GLC's Owosso depot when an oncoming vehicle clipped another car as it attempted to pass. The clipped car lost control, spun off the road, and rolled several times before coming to a rest on its side in a wooded area off the highway.

Fortunately, McMullen was far enough away to avoid being involved in the accident and stopped his vehicle near where the other driver left the road. He ran to the crashed car and found a female driver stuck inside. The only way to enter the vehicle was by breaking the sunroof. He helped the woman out of the seatbelt and pulled her from the vehicle just as it caught fire.

"The police said Tommy saved the woman's life," said Senior Trainmaster Kevin Mayer. "He was the only one who stopped, and if he'd hesitated, she would have still been in the vehicle as it burned."

The driver suffered several severe lacerations and a head injury. She was treated at the scene by paramedics and taken to a local hospital where she recovered. Mayer says McMullen gave his statement to the officers and continued to the depot. McMullen joined the GLC just after the Watco startup, in November 2025. Mayer says McMullen has been an asset to the team. He's always focused on safety, stops work and asks questions when he's unsure about something, and is eager to help others.

"Tommy came in and told us what happened. He still had some of the woman's blood on his arms," Mayer said. "He wasn't rattled. That's just who he is. He washed his arms and went about his day switching railcars for our customers."

Source: Watco Dispatch Newsletter

RIBBON CUTTING CEREMONY HELD FOR NEWLY RENOVATED HAZMAT TRAINING FACILITY

The Michigan State Police Emergency Management and Homeland Security Division (MSP/EMHSD) celebrated the expansion of the Emergency Management and Homeland Security Training Center (EMHSTC), Hazardous Materials Training Unit July 14 with a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by MSP and EMHSD leadership, first responders, industry leaders and the facility's founders.

"For more than three decades, the Emergency Management and Homeland Security Training Center has prepared hazardous materials responders with the knowledge and skills needed to protect Michigan communities," said Capt. Kevin Sweeney, deputy state director of Emergency Management and commander of the Michigan State Police Emergency Management and Homeland Security Division.

"This expansion builds on that legacy by providing modern classrooms, upgraded technology and enhanced training environments that will support high-quality instruction and help meet the growing demand for years to come."



From left: Col. James F. Grady, MSP director, Wendy Galbreath, MSP Hazmat Training Unit Manager, and Capt. Kevin Sweeny, deputy state director of Emergency Management and commander of the MSP Emergency Management and Homeland Security Division, cut the ribbon at the July 14 event. *Photo Credit: MSP.*

Construction on the multi-million-dollar renovation and expansion project began in August 2025. Improvements include two modern classrooms equipped with state-of-the-art audiovisual technology and direct access to the training yard and garage, allowing instructors to seamlessly integrate classroom instruction with hands-on exercises.

Three new conference rooms provide additional meeting and instructional space, including a flexible room that can be divided into separate areas or converted into classroom space as needed.

"The expansion of this training center is a tremendous step forward for hazardous materials training in Michigan," said Wendy Galbreath, manager of the Hazardous Materials Training Unit at the MSP/EMHSD.

"The additional space allows us to offer more training, conduct multiple classes at the same time, and better serve emergency responders across the state. As the Hazardous Materials Training Unit approaches its 35th anniversary this September, this expansion helps ensure we're ready to meet the growing demand well into the future."

Originally constructed in 1991 through a public-private partnership between private freight railroad carriers, the Michigan Chemistry Council, Michigan State Police, and several other private-sector partners, the EMHSTC is a cornerstone for hazardous materials and emergency response training with its unique 4-acre property, including real railcars and tank cars and other real-life scenario training props.



Wendy Galbreath MSP Hazmat Training Unit Manager and Jon Cool, MRA, tour the Training Center additions. *Photo Credit: Wendy Galbreath.*

SEE TRACKS? THINK TRAIN: RAIL SAFETY IS A YEAR-ROUND COMMITMENT

Rail Safety Week, now known in the United States as **See Tracks? Think Train! Week,** recently brought renewed attention to the importance of making safe choices around railroad tracks and trains.

Led by Operation Lifesaver, Inc. (OLI), the annual observance encourages communities, motorists, pedestrians and rail industry partners to work together to prevent crossing collisions and trespassing incidents.

This year, the kickoff event was back in Kalamazoo to share key rail safety messaging. We want to thank Reps. Julie Rogers and Matt Longjohn for attending and speaking at the event.

The message is straightforward: Know the facts, recognize the signs and always expect a train. Drivers should cross railroad tracks only at designated crossings, obey warning devices and never go around lowered gates. Pedestrians should stay off railroad tracks and railroad property, which are dangerous and often restricted areas.

Rail safety awareness extends beyond a single week. In June, the MRA, OLI and its partners also promoted Emergency Notification System (ENS) Sign Awareness Day, highlighting the lifesaving purpose of the blue-and-white signs located at railroad crossings. .

Each sign provides a telephone number and a unique crossing identification number that can help railroad dispatchers respond quickly to emergencies.

We appreciated state legislators recording their own ENS sign social media videos. A special shout-out to Rep. Xiong for her TikTok safety video. Well done!

If a vehicle stalls or becomes stuck on railroad tracks, everyone should exit immediately and move far away from the tracks, even if no train is visible. Locate the blue-and-white ENS sign, call the number displayed and provide the crossing ID. If no sign is available, call 911.

Michigan's railroads and the Michigan Railroads Association support Operation Lifesaver's ongoing commitment to public education. By sharing these messages throughout the year, we can help ensure that every person who encounters a railroad crossing understands the risks, knows what to do and helps #STOPTrackTragedies.

To get involved with Michigan Operation Lifesaver, please email Curtis Stewart at **frmn2009@sbcglobal.net.**



Rep Julie Rogers speaks at the 2026 See Tracks Think Train Safety Week Kickoff in Kalamazoo Sept. 21. *Photo Credit: MDOT.*



Rep Matt Longjohn speaks at the the 2026 See Tracks Think Train Safety Week Kickoff in Kalamazoo Sept. 21. *Photo Credit: MDOT.*



State Rep. Mai Xiong posted a TikTok video in June as part of our ENS sign safety awareness campaign. *Photo Credit: Mai Xiong.*

IN THE U.S., A PERSON OR VEHICLE IS HIT BY A TRAIN APPROXIMATELY EVERY THREE HOURS.



MOOLENAAR INTRODUCES LEGISLATION TO PROTECT U.S. RAILWAYS FROM FOREIGN SURVEILLANCE



Congressman John Moolenaar.
Photo Credit: US House of Representatives.

U.S. Rep. John Moolenaar (R-Mich.) has introduced bipartisan legislation aimed at protecting the nation's railroad network from foreign surveillance and safeguarding sensitive cargo movements.

The Keeping China Off the Rails Act (H.R. 8417) would address gaps in current law governing foreign-adversary technology on railroad freight cars. While existing restrictions apply to certain newly manufactured railcars, the legislation would extend requirements to existing cars, including those used to transport military cargo.

The legislation responds to concerns that connected sensors, tracking systems, and other technology manufactured by companies tied to the Chinese Communist Party could potentially be used to monitor the movement of sensitive U.S. shipments. The bill includes a phased compliance schedule intended to give the railroad industry time to transition away from covered technology.

"America's rail system plays a vital role in our economy and our national defense," Moolenaar said. "We cannot allow the companies with ties to the Chinese Communist Party access to information that could track sensitive shipments and undermine our national security."

Moolenaar's rail-security provision was subsequently included in the House-passed FY2027 National Defense Authorization Act. The provision prohibits sensitive monitoring technology manufactured in China or by a foreign entity of concern from being used on railcars owned or leased by the Department of War.

The legislation highlights the growing intersection of railroad technology, supply-chain security, and national defense.

MIDWEST RAIL CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS FREIGHT RAIL'S ROLE IN THE NEXT ERA OF TRANSPORTATION

The 2026 Midwest Rail Conference brought together industry leaders, researchers and transportation stakeholders August 11–13 at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Organized by Michigan Technological University, the conference examined the challenges and opportunities shaping freight and passenger rail across the Midwest.

Freight rail's role in strengthening the Midwest region's economy was a central message. Discussions emphasized the importance of continued investment in rail infrastructure, operational efficiency and innovation to support shippers and maintain a competitive transportation network.

Freight rail conversations also focused on the challenges facing railroads and their customers in an increasingly complex transportation environment. Conference sessions examined how tariffs, cargo theft and other supply-chain risks can affect the movement of goods, while emphasizing the importance of reliable rail service and resilient infrastructure.

Speakers also highlighted the role of shortline railroads in connecting customers to the national rail network and the importance of Great Lakes ports as gateways for regional commerce.

A session examining the future of freight rail in Michigan and Wisconsin reinforced the need for continued investment, technological innovation and strong partnerships between railroads, shippers and government.

Workforce development was another recurring theme, with industry and academic leaders discussing how to attract and prepare the next generation of rail professionals.

The conference also highlighted the value of collaboration among railroads, customers, government agencies and academic institutions. These partnerships are essential to addressing transportation challenges, improving the movement of goods and preparing the rail industry for future demands.



From left: Jon Cool, MRA President, moderates a conversation with Brad Poet, Director of Sales & Marketing at Watco and Sarah Pawlata, AVP of Sales & Marketing at Genesee & Wyoming.
Photo Credit: MTU.

Together, the exchanges underscored freight rail's role as an essential part of the Midwest's economic and transportation infrastructure. As manufacturers, agricultural producers and other shippers navigate changing supply chains, railroads will remain an important link connecting Midwest businesses to domestic and international markets.

Karen Hedlund, a member of the Surface Transportation Board, delivered the opening keynote at the 2026 Midwest Rail Conference. Hedlund joined the STB in January 2022 after serving as Chief Counsel and Deputy Administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration from 2010 to 2014 and Chief Counsel of the Federal Highway Administration from 2009 to 2010.

Her participation provided a federal perspective to a conference that brought together railroads, shippers, government representatives, academics and transportation professionals. Her transportation background includes work involving rail, transit, highways, airports and other infrastructure.

The Surface Transportation Board plays an important federal role in the nation's freight transportation system, including economic regulation of the railroad industry. Hedlund's keynote added an important federal perspective to the conference's broader discussion about infrastructure, freight mobility, economic competitiveness and the future of rail transportation.

TRACKING SAFETY: HOW FEDERAL FUNDING IS TRANSFORMING MICHIGAN'S RAIL CROSSINGS

With more than 4,600 public rail crossings cutting through our state, keeping drivers and pedestrians safe from trains is a top priority for local communities. Fortunately, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) utilizes two distinct federal funding streams to eliminate hazards, clear up traffic jams, and prevent tragedies at local intersections.

SECTION 130 FORMULA FUNDS

For standard safety upgrades, MDOT relies on a steady, predictable pot of federal money known as Section 130 funds. MDOT uses this money to target existing neighborhood crossings that need better visibility.

These projects are usually smaller in scale but highly effective – such as replacing old signs with flashing lights, adding physical crossing gates, or updating pavement markings. Because the federal government covers up to 100% of these costs, local towns can secure life-saving upgrades without draining municipal budgets.

FRA RAILROAD CROSSING ELIMINATION GRANTS

When a community faces a massive, systemic issue – like a long freight train blocking emergency vehicles or trapping commuters for hours – basic flashing lights are not enough.

In these cases, MDOT and local municipalities can team up to apply for highly competitive, nationwide **FRA Railroad Crossing Elimination (RCE) Grants**. This multi-million-dollar program is designed for heavy infrastructure overhauls.

Instead of just adding a sign, RCE grants pay to physically separate the road from the tracks by constructing overpass bridges or roadway underpasses so cars and trains never have to cross paths again.

Whether your neighborhood needs a simple set of active warning gates or a major new bridge to clear up traffic, these federal programs give Michigan communities the exact tools they need to keep everyone moving safely.

CONTACT MDOT RAIL SAFETY

Do you have a crossing safety concern, or is your municipality planning a road project near an existing track? Local road authorities and residents can coordinate directly with the state. Visit the **MDOT Rail Safety Regulation Page** to find your regional rail inspector or submit inquiries directly via email at **MDOT-RailSafety@Michigan.gov.**

MICHIGAN LEGISLATORS RECOGNIZED AS 2026 RAIL CHAMPIONS

The Michigan Railroads Association (MRA) recognized three state legislators with its 2026 Rail Champion Award for their commitment to understanding and supporting Michigan's freight rail industry: State Rep. Amos O'Neal (D-Saginaw), State Rep. Donni Steele (R-Lake Orion), and State Rep. William Bruck (R-Erie Township).

Now in its third year, the Rail Champion Award recognizes legislators who demonstrate a commitment to working with the freight rail industry through engagement with railroad representatives, participation in rail tours and operational activities, and efforts to better understand the role rail transportation plays in Michigan's economy and communities.

O'Neal, who represents Saginaw and the surrounding area, has developed a strong relationship with Lake State Railway and has made multiple visits to the railroad's operations.

Those visits have provided him with a firsthand look at how freight railroads safely and efficiently move Michigan-made products and essential commodities.

Steele, chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Local Transportation, has also taken an active interest in Michigan's transportation infrastructure and freight network. Chair Steele has emphasized strong rail infrastructure in our state and what that means for our manufacturers and shippers.



From left: Reps. Amos O'Neal, William Bruck, and Donni Steele receive rail champion awards from Jon Cool.

Bruck, who represents communities in Monroe and Lenawee counties and serves on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, has gained firsthand exposure to freight rail operations by touring rail operations.

Bruck's district includes Class 1 and shortline freight carriers.

Rep. Bruck worked with the MRA by introducing legislation to bolster critical infrastructure language dealing with railroad properties and corridors.

Together, O'Neal, Steele and Bruck represent the bipartisan engagement that is important to maintaining a strong freight rail network in Michigan.

Their willingness to visit railroad facilities, ride the rails, meet with railroad employees and understand the industries that rely on freight service provides legislators with a firsthand perspective on the importance of rail transportation.

The MRA thanks Reps. O'Neal, Steele and Bruck for their continued engagement with Michigan's freight rail industry and congratulates them on being named the association's **2026 Rail Champions.**

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Members of the Michigan Railroads Association are: Adrian & Blissfield Railroad Co., Ann Arbor Railroad, CPKC, Charlotte Southern Railroad Co., CN, Consolidated Rail Corp. (Conrail), Coopersville-Marne, CSX Transportation, Delray Connecting Railroad, Detroit Connecting Railroad Co., Escanaba & Lake Superior Railroad, Grand Elk Railroad, Grand Rapids Eastern Railroad, Great Lakes Central Railroad, Hamilton Northwestern Railroad Co., Huron & Eastern Railway, Indiana Northeastern Railroad, Jackson & Lansing Line, Lake State Railway Co., Lapeer Industrial Railroad Co., Marquette Rail, Michigan Shore Railroad, Michigan Southern Railroad, Mid-Michigan Railroad, Mineral Range, Inc., Norfolk Southern Corp. and West Michigan Railroad Co.

GORAIL

HAVE YOU VISITED GORAIL'S RAIL GRANT HUB?

Federal infrastructure programs are creating new opportunities for rail investment, recognizing rail's role in building a safer, more sustainable, and resilient transportation network. Railroads are also investing directly through community grant programs that support local projects aligned with infrastructure and sustainability goals.

This hub is designed as a resource for state, county, and local leaders seeking information on federal and state rail grants and railroad-led initiatives to advance projects in their communities.

Find info here: **gorail.org/rail-grant-news**

Please take note:
MDOT's Local Grade Separation Program Deadline for applications is December 1st, 2026.

Questions?

Contact MDOT's Larry Doyle at 517-249-0103 or DoyleL@Michigan.gov.