

# Western Transportation Institute awarded \$6.5 Million FRA CRISI Grant in partnership with Big Sky Passenger Rail

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*Other partners include IAM Union, Montana Tribal Councils, and Industry Stakeholders*

BILLINGS, MT, UNITED STATES, October 31, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In a transformative step for workforce development in the rail industry, the Western Transportation Institute (WTI) at Montana State University has been awarded a \$6.5 million grant by the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) Program. This funding, sourced from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the 2023 and 2024 Consolidated Appropriations Acts, will strengthen and diversify Montana's rail workforce pipeline by engaging academic, industry, and community partners.

The project will leverage the expertise of WTI as the lead administrator, with critical support from the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority (BSPRA), the University of Memphis, and California State University Long Beach. BSPRA's portion is \$630,000, supported by a \$210,000 in-kind contribution, which will be instrumental in developing regional workforce needs and advancing project strategies through an advisory group. "To build and operate the passenger and freight rail infrastructure of the 21st century, we need a trained workforce," said BSPRA Chairman Dave Strohmeier. "This CRISI grant will help us as a region and nation do just that. As we're entering a rail renaissance in America, we're delighted to partner with the Western Transportation Institute to support and create the rail workforce of the future, now, in Montana and beyond."

The WTI-led initiative also received enthusiastic support from labor and Tribal leaders. Michael Dolson of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) and Serena Wetherelt of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe provided endorsement letters acknowledging the project's importance for regional workforce development. Speaking to the role of skilled labor in revitalizing American rail, Josh Hartford, Special Assistant to the International President for the IAM Union Rail Division, remarked, "The future of America's rail systems depends not only on investing in new, high-tech infrastructure but also growing our talent pool of skilled workers here at home. The historic investments by the Biden-Harris Administration, through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, are putting the building blocks in place for American workers to lead a renaissance of a strong, safe American rail network. The IAM Union looks forward to continuing to seek public and private rail partnerships that benefit countless communities nationwide."

The CRISI grant's \$8 million total budget will implement capacity-building activities, including

creating rail-focused career pathways, a Faculty Rail Fellows Program, and summer rail academies in Montana, Tennessee, and California. These efforts will provide educational and hands-on opportunities for faculty, K-12 teachers, and youth in underserved areas. "Our vision is a comprehensive approach to rail workforce development, bringing economic and job benefits to local communities through education and industry collaboration," said Kelvin Wang, WTI Director. Susan Gallagher, the workforce development program manager at WTI, is coordinating the operations of the new grant.

This initiative lays the foundation for a more interconnected, resilient rail industry that supports economic growth and regional connectivity across Montana and the Northwest by equipping local talent with critical skills.

For more information, visit [Bigskyrail.org](https://Bigskyrail.org) or contact BSPRA Chairman Dave Strohmaier at 406.529.5580 or BSPRA Executive Director Jess Peterson at 406.850.1592.

#### ABOUT THE BIG SKY PASSENGER RAIL AUTHORITY

The Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority is a Montana state government subdivision and the state's largest transportation district. It comprises 18 member counties and ex officio members from three tribal nations, Amtrak, the Montana Department of Transportation, BNSF Railway, and the AFL-CIO. The BSPRA is committed to re-establishing safe, reliable, and sustainable passenger rail service across southern Montana and the Big Sky North Coast Corridor, extending from Seattle to Chicago (formerly known as the North Coast Hiawatha).

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