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Lawmakers in Q-C to push rail passenger service

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MOLINE - Two influential Illinois lawmakers toured the region Monday and updated civic and business leaders on the growing push for Amtrak service.

"We're excited to be here, to make sure the Quad-Cities gets the passenger service that the coalition is demonstrating that the community wants," state Rep. Elaine Nekritz, D-Des Plaines, said of the Quad-Cities Passenger Rail Coalition (QC Rail).

QC Rail, public/private coalition, formed in May, and now has 1,100 members advocating for Amtrak service between the Quad-Cities and Chicago. The group works to determine how best to implement rail service.

Rep. Nekritz, chair of the House Rail Safety Committee, appeared with state Rep. Donald Moffitt, of Galesburg, the Republican spokesman for the House committee.

"This is a perfect example of how government should work," Rep. Moffitt said of the bipartisan effort. "We want to keep Illinois as a rail hub for the nation. There are a lot of things we can do to continue the momentum.

"Rail is so important for the economy," he said. "It's important for economic development. We all benefit when we expand passenger rail. You take vehicles off the highways, reduce congestion. It's good for the environment, it creates jobs. It's about quality of life and expanding tourism."

Both legislators have been instrumental in advocating for expanded passenger rail service in Illinois, said Paul Rumler, director of community and economic development for the Illinois Quad City Chamber of Commerce.

"What we're happy about is these two leaders in the state of Illinois in passenger rail, and rail in general, are in the Quad-Cities," he said. The chamber wants



Photo: Submitted
Rep. Elaine Nekritz (D-DesPlaines)



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Rep. Donald Moffitt (R-Galesburg)

to impress upon the Illinois General Assembly the importance of returning passenger service, Mr. Rumler said.

An IDOT-commissioned Amtrak route study for the Quad-Cities will be completed in the next few weeks, which will outline ridership estimates, service time and frequency, infrastructure improvements, route alternatives, and the cost to implement service.

QC Rail wants to see \$45 million in capital funding from the state of Illinois to begin working toward immediate implementation of the new service.

State Sen. Mike Jacobs, D-East Moline, said that will face huge obstacles in the House, where Speaker Mike Madigan is opposing the capital bill passed last week in the Senate. The \$13-billion plan, which includes adding three new casinos in Illinois, carries about \$132 million in downstate transportation funding, Sen. Jacobs said.

"That dollar amount could decrease or it could increase," he said of a House spending bill. Sen. Jacobs said passenger rail is vital to the area by "honoring our past."

The first passenger train arrived in the Quad-Cities from Chicago in 1854. Passenger rail service continued for 125 years until 1978 when its owner, the Rock Island Railroad, entered bankruptcy.

Rep. Nekritz, who spearheaded the establishment of the state rail committee, urged a U.S. House rail subcommittee this past summer to support the U.S. Senate's Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2007.

The bill would re-authorize Amtrak for five years and provide millions of dollars in federal matching funds to states willing to participate in funding the 110-mph, nine-state Midwest Regional Rail System.

Rep. Nekritz told the subcommittee that federal matching funds are needed to help states like Illinois handle growing rail ridership.

The state increased its annual spending last year for Amtrak corridor service from \$12 million to \$25 million. The additional money was used to increase state-sponsored Amtrak round trips from three a day to seven.

Earlier this year, Amtrak approved a route expansion from Chicago to Rockford and Dubuque, Iowa.

Rep. Moffitt said state and federal funding questions are very much in the air, but the coming Amtrak study should provide details on how to proceed.

"Things are being done in the proper order," he said. "Depending on what the feasibility study says, the next thing is getting a capital bill to fund it."

After meeting with QC Rail members Monday morning, the lawmakers got a tour of rail-related sites in the Illinois Quad-Cities, including Abbey Station in Rock Island, the Silvis rail yards, and other riverfront areas.

For more information on passenger rail expansion, visit www.qcrail.com.