



Study: Amtrak service to Chicago wanted

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Nearly 111,000 people annually would use passenger rail service between the Quad-Cities and Chicago, a new Amtrak feasibility study estimates.

Those passenger estimates, though, are based on the premise of improving the railroad tracks between the Quad-Cities and Chicago enough to allow for 79 mph travel, and on having two daily round trips between the communities.

The shortest and fastest of two proposed routes also would provide the most annual passengers and revenue, the Amtrak study estimates. It would use a combination of railroad tracks now owned by Iowa Interstate Railroad and Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway to get trains to the Amtrak line going into Chicago.

Several million dollars worth of track improvements would be needed, though, to allow the passenger trains to travel 79 mph. The tracks in the Quad-Cities area currently are rated for about half that speed.

Paul Rumler, a member of the Quad Cities Passenger Rail Coalition and Illinois Quad City Chamber of Commerce, said the next step is advocating for funding.

"We now know this would be a great addition" to the Quad-Cities, he said. "Illinois ridership has skyrocketed. The economic impact, the impact on the environment, the impact on the quality of life, they are all positive additions to us."

Mr. Rumler said the coalition also is pushing for an Amtrak reauthorization bill that passed the U.S. Senate and is up for consideration in the House of Representatives this year.

That bill would provide \$11.4 billion for Amtrak over six years. Of that, \$1.4 billion would be for capital improvements. States could apply for 80/20 percent matching grants for rail infrastructure.

He said Congress also passed a consolidated appropriations bill before Christmas that earmarks \$30 million for interstate passenger rail grant programs.

Andy Rowe, economic development director for U.S. Rep. Phil Hare, D-Rock Island, said besides securing funding, Amtrak would need to negotiate for access to the freight railroads' tracks, and improvements would have to be made.

"The Quad-Cities rates for 40 mph," he said of the track speeds. "If you want at least 79 mph, there are going to have to be some improvements."

He said the review was good, and that Rep. Hare and Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., are interested.

"I think with those two people on board, it makes a big difference," he said.

The study was requested by the Illinois Department of Transportation and is also in response to a January 2007 town meeting in Rock Island. Sen. Durbin spoke of the need for passenger rail service between the Quad-Cities and Chicago at that meeting.

"The senator believes strongly that the Quad-Cities would benefit tremendously from this route," said Joe Shoemaker, a spokesman for Sen. Durbin. Amtrak "gives communities like the Quad-Cities (greater) access to major markets, especially for business."

The feasibility study estimated the costs of upgrading the tracks along the shortest and fastest route would be between \$14 million and \$23 million. That route would take passenger trains along the Iowa Interstate tracks to a proposed connection with the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway near Wyanet, Ill. From there, the trains would head into downtown Chicago along BNSF and Amtrak lines.

Rock Island Mayor Mark Schwiebert said the proposed route through Wyanet would result in a 3-hour-20 minute trip between the Quad-Cities and Chicago, possibly leaving here daily at 6:30 a.m. and returning at 6:30 p.m. from Chicago.

The only local funding necessary will be to provide a train station stop in the Quad-Cities, as well as its ongoing maintenance, Mayor Schwiebert said.

Denise Bulat, director of the Bi-State Regional Commission, told the Rock Island City Council Monday that costs for implementing the rail service were estimated to be \$30 million five years ago.

"That is great news," she said of the new study.

"We are considered one of the most underserved routes in the state," Mayor Schwiebert said. "This is much closer to reality than we would have expected a year ago. It really sounds like an exciting thing."

Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari said Amtrak will do whatever IDOT asks.

"If it means going to the freight railroads (IAIS and BNSF) about getting capital considerations in greater detail, that's a possibility," Mr. Magliari said. "Our business is running passenger trains. This is a business we want to grow. It shows great potential.

"I have recently spent some time on Interstate 80," he said. "I would prefer being on the train. Gasoline prices have gone up, the tolls, and the cost of parking in Chicago certainly hasn't gone down."

Mr. Magliari said once funding was in place, it probably would take two years to improve the railroad tracks and get the rail cars ready for a Quad-Cities to Chicago route.

A separate study, funded by the state of Illinois, is examining possible locations for a station between the Government Bridge in Rock Island and Silvis, Mr. Rumler said. That study began last month and should offer recommendations by June, he said.

According to Mr. Magliari, Amtrak charges between \$19 and \$51 one way for coach tickets along its 162-mile route from Galesburg to Chicago. Amtrak has three daily round-trip trains between Galesburg and Chicago, according to its Web site, plus a fourth train -- the California Zephyr -- that stops in Galesburg on its way from Chicago to San Francisco.

He said Amtrak sold 87,004 tickets for its Galesburg-Chicago routes during a 12-month period ending Sept. 30.

The shorter Quad-Cities to Chicago route would be 177 miles.

According to Mapquest, the drive between downtown Rock Island and Chicago's Union Station, the city's main Amtrak hub, is about 182 miles and takes three hours -- without traffic jams along interstates 80, 55, 90 and 290 factored in.

Amtrack between Q-C and Chicago

Details for 79 mph routes between the Quad-Cities and Chicago, each featuring two daily round-trip departures. Capital costs do not include rolling stock or stations.

Route A: Quad-Cities to Naperville to Chicago via IAIS/BNSF/Amtrak lines

Capital cost: \$22.7 million

Estimated annual ridership: 110,800

Travel time: 3 hours, 20 minutes

Annual revenue: \$2.6 million

Annual operating expenses: \$8.5 million

Estimated annual subsidy: \$5.9 million

Construction time: 2 years

Route B: Quad-Cities to Joliet to Chicago via IAIS/CSXT/Metra/Rock Island lines

Capital cost: \$94.1 million

Ridership: 84,300

Running time: 4 hours, 46 minutes

Annual revenue: \$2.1 million

Annual operating expenses: \$8.4 million

Estimated annual subsidy: \$6.3 million

Construction time: 3 years

Source: Amtrak