



Editorial: “Alllllll aboard! Next stop, the Quad-Cities!”

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The Dispatch and The Rock Island Argus

"Alllllll aboard! Next stop, the Quad-Cities!"

And we are so ready to ride those rails; that's the message to federal, state and Amtrak officials in a Quad-Cities to Chicago passenger rail feasibility study released Monday.

The Amtrak report requested by the Illinois Department of Transportation, shows that nearly 111,000 people would use passenger rail between the Quad-Cities and Chicago each year. Count us among those who were convinced that if we could build the infrastructure, riders would come from all over the area to take advantage of an easy Quad-Cities to Windy City route.

A number of people, particularly those behind the Quad Cities Passenger Rail Coalition, thought so, too. By this week, 2,800 people had signed on to the effort and 625 area college students had joined the Q-C Rail Facebook Group to support passenger rail. We salute them all for laying the groundwork that has gotten us from there to here. It wasn't, however, until U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin held a town meeting in the Quad-Cities with IDOT and Amtrak last January that the effort got fully on track.

The study prompted by that session indicates that Q-C passenger rail is not only feasible, but desirable. The cost to implement it is also relatively modest given the wide-ranging impact restoration of a passenger route would have both here and in Chicago.

Estimates range from \$14 million to \$23 million to upgrade the tracks on the shortest of two routes to accommodate 79-mile-per-hour passenger trains. For that price, the state gets an important cog in its transportation infrastructure and the economy gets a significant boost.

Don't take our word for it. Here's what Paul Rumler, director of community & economic development for the Illinois Quad Cities Chamber, had to say about it: "The Quad-Cities region will benefit from passenger rail for business, leisure, and commuter travel as well as the associated impact on regional commerce, environment, and quality of life." And none of that takes into account the convenience of our visitors, 60 percent of whom come from the Chicagoland area.

The study also estimates the annual cost to the state of all that as low as \$6 million each year. Locally, it's significantly less. According to Rock Island Mayor Mark Schwiebert, the Quad-Cities would be required to provide a train station stop in the Quad-Cities and then to maintain it. (A study is underway to decide where it would go.) "We are considered one of the most underserved routes in the state," the mayor said. "This is much closer to reality than we would have expected a year ago. It really sounds like an exciting thing."

Also on board is Amtrak. "Our business is running passenger trains," spokesman Marc Magliari said. "This is a business we want to grow. It shows great potential." It does. That does not mean, however, that it will happen. The parties involved must redouble their efforts. Now that they're armed with this study the fight should be easier, though not easy.

For example, Mr. Rumler said, "Now we need funding -- Illinois' capital bill with funding for Quad-Cities passenger rail is a regional priority." Politics continue to keep such a bill from becoming a reality.

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 this year. It provides \$11.4 billion for Amtrak over six years. State's would be allowed to apply for 80/20 percent matching grants for rail infrastructure from \$1.4 billion set aside for capital improvements.

You can help in both efforts by joining your friends and neighbors in signing onto the Quad Cities Passenger Rail Coalition (www.qcrail.com) and by sending letters to your state representatives, legislative leaders, your congressmen and the governor in support of Quad-Cities passenger rail.

According to Mr. Magliari, once the money is there, it would likely take two years to fix the tracks and get the cars ready for a Quad-Cities to Chicago route. Imagine ... by 2010, Quad-Cities could be hopping onto a daily route to Chicago.

If the momentum created by Q-C Rail, Sen. Durbin and this IDOT study can be maintained, we may well do more than imagine it; we'll be doing it.