

Good seats still available on passenger rail train

By The Dispatch and The Rock Island Argus

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What a difference a year makes. When the Quad Cities Passenger Rail Coalition invited its growing army of supporters to a one-year anniversary party Monday, there was plenty to celebrate and plenty of reasons for optimism.

Indeed, as Jim Bohnsack, the coalition's chair, told those gathered at the Celebration Belle in Moline, "It's very possible in two years we will see rail service from the Quad-Cities to Chicago." That would be a remarkable achievement and welcome asset long sought by Quad-Cities economic development leaders.

Of course, a lot has to happen between now and then, but the progress the coalition and its backers have made in the past year is impressive.

For starters, some 3,500 area residents, college students, community and business leaders and elected officials have visited the coalition's web site (www.qcrail.com) to voice support for the effort and about 100 local businesses (including the Moline Dispatch Publishing Co.), labor unions and community organizations have signed on as official supporters. The effort also comes at a time when Amtrak ridership is up significantly, a fact not lost on the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Additionally, feasibility studies have shown that the service is a winner. And though it won't be free, the cost of creating and then maintaining it are dwarfed by the potential benefits the Quad-Cities to Chicago route can bring.

In more good news, the Quad-Cities representatives in Washington, including Sen. Dick Durbin and Rep. Phil Hare, D-Rock Island, are solidly behind a Quad-Cities to Chicago route. "Phil Hare has submitted a \$13.5 million earmark," said coalition executive director Paul Rumler. Rep. Bruce Braley and Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa are also trying to help, he said. "Our congressional delegation is stepping up."

So are state lawmakers including Reps. Pat Verschoore and Mike Boland and Sen. Mike Jacobs. But the legislature's and the governor's continued failure to craft an acceptable capital building program threatens to slow the rail projects and others statewide, including funding for the critical Western Illinois University Quad-Cities Moline Riverfront Campus.

The coalition might be able to get the job done without a capital bill and Rep. Boland said

he's asked for \$5 million from the state budget to help pay for some for some of the costs. "I don't want to go out on a limb and say 'Oh yeah, we're definitely going to get it,'" he said Monday. "Unless we get a capital bill, we're going to have to do it kind of piecemeal."

A responsible, statewide capital spending plan would significantly speed up the process and help the coalition to meet Mr. Bohnsack's ambitious two-year timeline. Once a Chicago to Quad-Cities route is completed, the rail advocates hope to extend the route to Iowa City, Des Moines and Omaha.

There was a reason the Quad-Cities was home to passenger rail to Chicago for 125 years. Sadly, however, the area has been without service for nearly three decades. It's time to change that.

Even if you didn't get to the coalition's birthday party Monday, you can still climb aboard. Sign up at www.qcrail.com, then contact your state representative and tell him to make a capital bill the Legislature's No. 1 priority today, rather than wait for the May 31 scheduled adjournment deadline when a capital plan will require a super-majority for passage.

There are a number of proposals in play in Springfield to pay for the plan, including a bailout of the state's horse-racing industry and a new Chicago casino. Word was on Tuesday that leaders are meeting with the governor's people in an effort to put together a plan that will work.

Every reasonable idea should be on the table for what would be the best economic stimulus package lawmakers could give to their constituents. They should put politics aside and do so without delay.