



Yes, send us the trains

By The Dispatch and The Rock Island Argus

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When U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill. came to the Quad-Cities Tuesday it was to join the growing chorus lamenting rising gas prices, and he said he wants the Federal Trade Commission to take a long, hard look at the ridiculous profits being reported by Big Oil, while the nation's economy is buried under the ever-rising cost of oil.

Gas prices, according to the Senate's second-highest ranking Democrat, are on everybody's minds. "As I travel across the state of Illinois, I hear concerns from families, from businesses, from farmers and from truckers -- and in Washington, I even hear from airline executives -- that the high energy prices are changing a lot of things and making life a lot more difficult," Sen. Durbin said at a press conference.

He's right. It would be difficult to find anyone, save perhaps those big oil executives with their huge paychecks, who is not hard hit by prices at the pump. But we very much doubt that the FTC will do much of anything about the business even though it is charged with investigating anti-competitive practices. Sen. Durbin acknowledged that an investigation, if there is one, would take several months to complete. He also said in an interview later with The Dispatch and The Rock Island Argus that long-term solutions are needed to combat the nation's dependence on foreign oil.

One way to do that is to reduce demand for energy through things like buses and passenger rail. Toward that end, Sen. Durbin brought with him Tuesday a letter he and other Senate leaders sent to Amtrak seeking trains for the proposed Chicago to Iowa City via the Quad-Cities route, and for a Chicago to Dubuque, Iowa, via Rockford and Galena route.

The letter, signed by Sen. Durbin and fellow Illinois Democrat Sen. Barack Obama, Iowa's Sens. Tom Harkin and Chuck Grassley, and Delaware's Joe Biden, was sent Tuesday to Amtrak President and CEO Alexander Kummant. It asks him to free up some of the rolling stock stored at an Amtrak maintenance facility in Delaware to be rehabilitated to service the proposed expanded routes including Quad-Cities to Chicago. It predicted that "the benefits to both states will be tremendous," and cited predicted record 28.8 million passenger ridership for this year in making the case for moving trains here.

"Enthusiasm for passenger rail service is at an all-time high, driven by high fuel prices, growing congestion, and environmental concern. Amtrak has seen phenomenal growth in Illinois the past few years, with all three state routes showing double digit percentage increase," the senators wrote. "To accommodate the expected boom in ridership" on the proposed routes, "we want to ensure that we have the absolute best rolling stock available. Please consider the viability of retrieving equipment from storage that could easily be rehabbed and used for Amtrak service into Iowa."

We join with the senators in urging Amtrak to provide the trains needed to service the proposed two trip a day routes through the Quad-Cities. Of course, having trains doesn't mean that the community will have the rails to run them on, or the dollars needed to make them go. As Sen. Durbin acknowledged Tuesday, that's the tough part. Creation of the route still awaits action on a state capital spending bill, and as the General Assembly rushes toward a Friday adjournment deadline, it seems ever more unlikely that a statewide building program will be approved this year. Sen. Durbin urged voters to continue to demand that lawmakers approve a capital bill. Besides passenger rail, a host of federal transportation dollars approved by Congress are not being spent in Illinois because of state lawmakers' continued inaction.

He's right. Unless and until the state approves the money for the Quad-Cities to Chicago route, it remains only a dream. Still every step forward is a welcome one. So, send us the trains.