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## **Climb aboard new Rock Island Line**

The Dispatch and The Rock Island Argus Editorial

The Rock Island Line is a mighty good road  
The Rock Island Line is the road to ride  
The Rock Island Line is a mighty good road  
If you want to ride you gotta ride it like you find it  
Get your ticket at the station for the Rock Island Line  
– Rock Island Line, Leadbelly

For decades, America's rail system and the Quad-Cities seemed to be inextricably entwined.

From informal discussions among a group of Rock Island leaders in June 1845, the Rock Island Line grew into a mighty rail system that would be the first to bridge the Mississippi River. The railroad was originally designed to connect the Illinois and Mississippi rivers, according to a company-issued history of the Rock Island Lines from around 1970. To sell it to skeptical investors, Rock Island rail pioneers decided to also connect it to Lake Michigan, and the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad was born.

That was in 1851. The Rock Island Lines would go on to become famous the world over. Abraham Lincoln made a name for himself defending the railroad after the Effie Afton struck the Quad-Cities Mississippi railroad bridge. The Rock Island Line was so mighty that it spawned songs and poems in its honor like the Leadbelly classic of the same name. Playwright Meredith Wilson named the opening song of "The Music Man" "Rock Island," such was the railroad's reach.

Now, fast forward to Dec. 31, 1978; that's when a disastrous, protracted merger effort drove the Rock Island Railroad into bankruptcy. Passenger service from the Quad-Cities – which was then using the Silvis depot - came to an end. And so a critical early gateway that helped to open the American West was closed. It has remained shuttered ever since, forcing anyone who wants to take the train to the Windy City here to go to either Galesburg or Princeton, Ill.

Amtrak was created specifically for moving passengers by Congress in 1970. Previously, freight carriers had to also ferry passengers. It didn't take long, however, for Congress to forget its reasons for creating Amtrak. The national passenger rail service has had to scrap for years for any funding it can get from hostile Congresses and stingy presidents, some of whom are keen on killing the service completely. Amtrak can take some measure of the

blame for that. It has been plagued by administrative problems and other messes. The government should focus on forcing Amtrak to fix what's broken. But it cannot and must not abandon the rail system. In fact, it should be working to strengthen it, particularly as America works to reduce its dependence on fossil fuel.

Meanwhile, even as it loses funds, rather than declining, Amtrak passenger figures keep on growing. In February, Amtrak, and Metra (which operates Chicago's commuter rail service) reported record ridership. Metra recorded 84.3 million passenger trips in 2006, the most in its history, and up 5.2 percent over 2005. Passengers also increased by 69 percent on newly expanded Amtrak routes between Chicago and St. Louis, Carbondale and Quincy.

Just imagine if the Quad-Cities to Chicago route were restored? A group of local leaders want to do more than imagine it. They want to make it happen. They've launched the Quad Cities Passenger Rail Coalition, whose primary goal is to rally support for the return of local passenger railway service.

Rock Island County Board chairman Jim Bohnsack said last month that after nearly 30 years without such service, "we now realize how important the rail is." Not just important, but vital to economic development and quality of life in the region. The group's goal is ambitious. Leaders hope to be riding the rails to Chicago in two years. But it's also doable, provided the Quad-Cities can get the right people on board the effort. Every supporter represents a vote and votes are powerful incentives for those who must rely on them to keep their jobs.

The timing is good. The Illinois Department of Transportation and Amtrak are looking at expansion including the best route to take passengers from the Quad-Cities to Chicago. But community support is essential if the agencies are to be convinced that we are serious about getting, and using a Q-C to Chicago route.

We urge all those interested to add their name to the list of passenger-rail supporters. Visit [www.quadcitychamber.com/qcrail](http://www.quadcitychamber.com/qcrail) and sign up to support a piece of Quad-Cities history that is also vital to our future.