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Amtrak delays Des Moines train study for year

But passenger rail service from Chicago to Dubuque and to the Quad Cities is likely in 2011, a spokesman says.

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Plans for a study needed to revive Des Moines-to-Chicago passenger train service have been put on a side track at least until next year, state officials say.

But Amtrak passenger train service to Dubuque and the Quad Cities appears likely in about two years.

Amtrak had been expected to complete a feasibility study sometime this year for twice-daily train service between Des Moines and Chicago. But the railroad has been deluged with requests for studies elsewhere in the wake of a national push to expand passenger train service, Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari said in Chicago.

As a result, Amtrak won't finish the Des Moines study until money issues are resolved to ensure service between Chicago and Iowa City, Magliari said. An Amtrak report in 2008 suggested an Iowa City passenger train could start operating if about \$32 million could be obtained to upgrade Iowa tracks and signals.

"It makes sense for us to say, "Let's get the train to Iowa City, and then we will work on studying the extension" to Des Moines, Magliari said. "If you do the study greatly in advance of obtaining the funding, the information in the study becomes outdated."

Iowa Department of Transportation Director Nancy Richardson said this week she hopes money issues for the Iowa City train can be resolved by early next year, which would permit work to be completed on the Des Moines train study. The state agency is seeking federal economic-stimulus money for the Iowa City project.

Des Moines mayor eager for progress

Meanwhile, Iowa DOT officials plan to jump-start research on Des Moines train service by hiring a consultant to complete key parts of the feasibility study for Amtrak.

Des Moines hasn't had regularly scheduled passenger train service since May 31, 1970, when the Rock Island Lines' Chicago-Council Bluffs Cornbelt Rocket ceased operations.

Mayor Frank Cownie said Thursday he wants the Amtrak study for Des Moines passenger service to be completed as quickly as possible. He said it's important to Amtrak to provide service to the Des Moines area because it is a major Iowa population center, and he favors extending the line westward to Council Bluffs.

"By not committing to the study and extending the route all the way across to at least Des Moines, I

think is a big mistake," Cownie said.

He said a study delay could result in the loss of a chance at federal economic-stimulus money, explaining, "that is why we want to be on the front end of this rather than the back end."

Illinois action aids Dubuque, Quad Cities

Despite the delay for Des Moines, Amtrak service between Chicago and Dubuque and Chicago and the Quad Cities should become a reality, possibly as soon as 2011, said Richard Harnish, executive director of the Midwest High-Speed Rail Association, a nonprofit Chicago advocacy group.

Harnish said Thursday that Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn's signing of a \$31 billion capital construction package last week will provide money to ensure the rail expansion happens.

"But this doesn't mean that folks should just say, 'Oh. Great. The train is coming,' " Harnish said. "There is still lots of work that needs to be done."

Amtrak spokesman Magliari said he agreed Dubuque and the Quad Cities will get passenger rail service. But the timing will depend upon how much time is needed to for track improvements.

"We have said two construction seasons" will be required, he said.

The proposed Des Moines train would make two round trips daily to Chicago at a top speed of 79 mph, passing through Newton, Iowa City and the Quad Cities.

Iowa officials have roughly estimated it would cost \$106 million to upgrade tracks between Iowa City and Des Moines to accommodate passenger trains.

Federal money could help improve tracks

The expense of improving the entire stretch between Iowa City and Omaha is estimated at \$291 million. Trains would run on the Iowa Interstate Railroad.

Iowa transportation officials said they are trying to secure federal economic-stimulus money to upgrade tracks for passenger rail service to the Quad Cities, Iowa City, Des Moines, Council Bluffs/Omaha, Dubuque and Waterloo. In addition, state officials are seeking federal money to upgrade Amtrak's existing California Zephyr route across southern Iowa on BNSF Railroad tracks.

Congress has approved spending \$8 billion to develop high-speed and intercity passenger rail networks. In addition, President Barack Obama has proposed a continuing \$1 billion annual expenditure. Forty states, including Iowa, are competing for federal money and have proposed passenger rail projects costing \$102 billion.

Gov. Chet Culver plans to ride a passenger train on Sunday from the Quad Cities to Chicago, where he will participate in a Midwest High Speed Rail Summit on Monday aimed at boosting efforts to make Chicago a regional passenger rail hub. Amtrak Board Chairman Tom Carper is scheduled to ride with the governor.

Culver's aides said he plans to sign a memorandum of understanding on Monday with Illinois Gov. Quinn on proposed passenger service from Chicago to Dubuque and Chicago to Iowa City.
