

Amtrak may be on Genoa track

Approach of train service is one of highlights from city's 2008 economic report at chamber session

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GENOA -- As soon as two or three years from now, Genoa could have Amtrak rail service.

That was the word from City Administrator Joe Misurelli as he delivered an upbeat wrap-up of the city's economic development in 2008 to members of the Genoa Area Chamber of Commerce Thursday.

Misurelli said both houses of Congress have approved an Amtrak funding bill that includes adding service along the Canadian National Railroad line from Chicago to Dubuque, Iowa. Along the way, the trains would stop in Genoa, Rockford, Freeport and Galena.

However, the new service cannot become reality until the state legislature approves matching operating funds and a state capital spending bill that includes money to build stations and sidings along the way.

Misurelli said Amtrak envisions running one train in the morning eastbound, stopping in Genoa about 7:45 a.m. and reaching Chicago about 9, plus one in the evening westbound, leaving Chicago about 5 p.m. and stopping in Genoa about 6:30.

Nearby DeKalb is located on one of the busiest freight railroad lines in the United States, Union Pacific's Chicago-Los Angeles mainline. Yet Northern Illinois University there is the only state university that has no passenger rail service. So Amtrak and state planners expect the new route to be connected to NIU by a shuttle bus running up Illinois 23 between DeKalb and Genoa.

"Nothing can happen until this is funded by the state, and some people say that won't happen as long as we have our current governor," Misurelli said. "But once this is funded, it would only take two construction seasons to get the service going."

He said the Genoa station might be built along Sycamore Street, near where CN forerunner Illinois Central Railroad operated a depot that still stands there, although badly deteriorated. The station might be no more elaborate than a bus-stop-like shelter, Misurelli added.

Retail coups

Looking back at the year, Misurelli said the city has made tremendous progress in landing and keeping retailers. Between 1998 and 2003, total retail sales went up just 1.96 percent. But from 1994 to 2007 they

tripled, from about \$26 million to about \$72 million.

About one-third of that increase came from the Petroliance oil dealership, whose sales all over the region are credited to Genoa. "But even without Petroliance, we have doubled our sales," he said.

"A year ago, people were very concerned about the downtown, with a lot of businesses folding," he said. But the city scored several coups during the year:

- When Ace Hardware moved to a new building along Illinois 23, many feared the old Ace store downtown would become a vacant eyesore. But NAPA Auto Parts moved in.
- Laughing Cat Antiques opened in another vacant building on Main Street.
- Prairie State Winery took over a former body shop and did an "adaptive reuse" of that building with the help of a "planned unit development" classification from the city council.
- Genoa Motorsports moved into another vacant site.
- Genoa Motors expanded.

Recently, "we've had people looking to open businesses in Genoa, and there weren't any buildings open for them," Misurelli said.

One continuing trouble spot, chamber members noted, is 20 acres owned by 84 Lumber along Derby Line Road. A lumber store there closed in October, and a planned truss manufacturing facility to be opened on the other 10 acres has not yet been built.

Misurelli said he believes the lumber store has only been "put in mothballs" until the construction industry picks up but 84 probably has canceled the truss factory project.

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