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Study says riders ready for rail service to Chicago

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Proposed railroad service between Iowa City and Chicago would draw 187,000 passengers a year but would require about \$55 million in set-up costs, according to an Amtrak study released Friday.

Iowa and Illinois also would have to pay annual operating costs of about \$6 million, the study said.

Amtrak conducted the study at the request of transportation officials from the two states.

The proposed route would go through the Quad Cities, then to Iowa City along tracks that run south of Interstate 80. The study's estimates assumed there would be two daily round trips.

"We're very encouraged by the results of the study because of the high ridership that's expected," said Tammy Nicholson, a rail policy coordinator with the Iowa Transportation Department. "The capital costs for the route are reasonable for the new service being put into shape."

It would be years before such service could begin. Lawmakers in Iowa and Illinois first would need to dedicate money to the effort, then Amtrak officials said it would take about two years to complete track upgrades and other work along the line.

"We very much want to grow the network, and most of our growth in recent years has been in state partnerships," said Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari.

The trip from Iowa City to Chicago would take about five hours with a train traveling up to 79 mph. A one-way adult ticket could range from \$25 to \$68, based on fares for comparable routes.

Magliari said the service would be popular with college students, especially the many Illinois natives who attend the University of Iowa. The university's hospital facilities are also a draw to the area, he said.

Others would likely take the train to visit casinos in the Quad-Cities area, officials said.

Iowa Gov. Chet Culver expressed support for the idea, saying it would cut dependency on fossil fuels and reduce highway congestion.

The states still face myriad questions, many of which revolve around the matter of how the costs would be divvied up.

Nicholson said the state will create an advisory committee charged with devising a statewide passenger rail program. The group will use Amtrak's study as it comes up with a proposal to present to the Legislature next year, she said.

At the request of the Illinois Department of Transportation, Amtrak in January completed a study on establishing passenger-train service between Chicago and the Quad-Cities. Parts of that plan were incorporated into the study of the Iowa City to Chicago route.

Iowa officials also have asked for a study on extending the route to Des Moines. That should be ready in late 2009, Magliari said.

Illinois is also looking at a new Amtrak line running between Rockford, Ill., and Dubuque.

Amtrak operates two daily trains through Iowa: its California Zephyr route between San Francisco and Chicago and its Southwest Chief route from Chicago to Los Angeles.