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Culver touts passenger rail expansion

by [O. Kay Henderson](#) on September 27, 2009

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Governor Culver is pushing for extension of passenger rail service between Des Moines and Chicago, and from Dubuque to Chicago, but some of the folks who live along the Amtrak route in southern Iowa worry they'll wind up losing passenger routes to those northern hubs.



Governor Culver started last Wednesday at the train depot in Creston. By midday the Burlington Northern Sante Fe Train made a stop in Albia where the high school band waited over an hour for the train to arrive. Culver made a brief

speech, standing on the train's back platform, and he mentioned those new passenger routes.

[AUDIO: Culver in Ottumwa – 7 min MP3](#)

“Iowa City to Chicago, for example, to give those students an opportunity to go back and forth between Chicago and Iowa City,” Culver told the crowd in Albia, “to allow people to commute, perhaps, into Chicago to do business there or vice versa.”

The governor touts the \$3 million from the state's new I-JOBS program to upgrade train tracks. In addition, the state is competing for federal economic stimulus money that could be used for that Iowa City to Chicago line and the northern route from Dubuque.

“That's also part of this long-term infrastructure vision that I share with President Obama. We need to give Iowans and Americans more cost-effective options when it comes to transportation,” Culver said last week in Ottumwa. “We're talking about a \$40 round-trip ticket from Iowa City to Chicago.” That would be the fare during “off-peak” time, according to an Amtrak spokesman.

Ottumwa was one of Culver's midday stops last Wednesday. A brass quartet played as people waited to eat a potluck lunch with the governor and his entourage. Ottumwa City Councilman Gordon Aistrope is retired now, but he routinely took the train out of Ottumwa rather than a flight out of Des Moines to do business in Chicago.

“It's easy for me to go Ottumwa to Chicago because my meetings are always downtown in the (Chicago) Loop and I'm there,” Aistrope says. “I don't have to drive to Des Moines — an hour and a half and I can be downtown in the Loop in about five-and-a-half hours. If I fly into O'Hare, it's going to be over six hours by the time I get downtown.”

Aistrope, though, worries a smaller city like Ottumwa may lose its Amtrak service if passenger rail is extended to larger cities like Des Moines.

“I'd be lying to you if I said there wasn't great concern,” Aistrope says. “But we'll just have to see what the plans are.”

Derrick James from Amtrak's governmental affairs office says Aistorpe's fears are unfounded.

“Amtrak is totally committed to this route,” James says. “There is no plan whatsoever to relocate any service from the southern Iowa route. We get so much support from these communities, we'd actually like to add more service to the route to become even more relevant to them.”

Culver, along with state transportation officials and others from the area jumped back on the three-car train after lunch in Ottumwa and made stops in Fairfield, Mount Pleasant and Burlington. On an average day, 40 freight trains and two passenger trains travel on that southern Iowa route.

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