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Amtrak optimistic on Iowa City service

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Iowa City, Ia. - A twice-daily Amtrak passenger train running between Chicago and Iowa City could become a reality by late 2011, Amtrak officials said here Friday.

The train, operating at a top speed of 79 mph, could make the trip in about five hours. Ridership aboard the route through Iowa and Illinois, including a stop in the Quad Cities, is estimated at about 187,000 passengers annually.

Details of an Amtrak study exploring the feasibility of the train service were unveiled Friday at a news conference at the University of Iowa attended by more than 100 people, many of whom were passenger train enthusiasts.

Jim Larew of Iowa City, who is Gov. Chet Culver's policy director and chief counsel, urged train backers to rally support for the Amtrak plan. The plan would require the Iowa Legislature to subsidize the train service with taxpayer money.

"Let us all become torchbearers, lighters of political bonfires," Larew said.

Nancy Richardson, Iowa Department of Transportation director, said the time is right to expand Amtrak service in Iowa because of soaring gasoline prices, along with concerns about traffic congestion and environmental issues.

"But this isn't going to be easy," Richardson said. She noted the proposal will require partnerships with Illinois, Amtrak, private railroads, community leaders, state and federal lawmakers, and others.

The Iowa transportation department will ask Iowa lawmakers next year for money to expand railroad passenger service, Richardson said. If the money is provided, it would require two additional years to upgrade the tracks and rehabilitate passenger cars for a Chicago-Iowa City train, Amtrak officials said. The money would not come from the state's road use tax fund, which is protected by the Iowa Constitution.

The states of Iowa and Illinois would share the capital investment costs

for the proposed train, as well as the estimated Amtrak operating contract expense of about \$6 million annually.

The estimated expense to upgrade the railroad tracks and signals would be about \$54.9 million. That doesn't include costs for railroad cars, locomotives and train stations.

Iowa is now served by two Amtrak long-distance trains that pass through southern Iowa daily en route between Chicago and the West Coast. Amtrak last year completed a study of establishing passenger rail service between Chicago and Dubuque, as well as research exploring possible train service between Chicago and the Quad Cities.

The Iowa City train would be an extension of the Chicago to Quad Cities route. Another report is due later this year that will look at extending the Amtrak train from Iowa City into Des Moines.

Amtrak officials said the best route between Chicago and Iowa City would use a stretch of the former Rock Island Lines, now owned by the Iowa Interstate Railroad, to a proposed track connection to the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway near Wyanet, Ill.

Amtrak has never operated scheduled passenger trains to Iowa City, which lost its Rock Island rail service in 1970, or to the Quad Cities, which lost its Rock Island service in 1978, officials said.

The proposed eastbound train would leave Iowa City at 7:02 a.m. and 5:02 p.m. each day en route to Chicago. The westbound train would leave Chicago daily at 9:30 a.m. and at 6:30 p.m. Officials said train fares would vary, depending upon a host of factors, but would be comparable to other Amtrak fares. For example, the cost of a one-way Amtrak ticket from Mount Pleasant to Chicago aboard the California Zephyr was selling Friday for \$37.

The Iowa City train would have two to three railroad coach cars, plus a dining car with business-class seating, officials said.

Iowa City Mayor Regenia Bailey predicted the Amtrak service would be popular among University of Iowa students, many of whom are from the Chicago area. But the option of riding a train would likely also be used by many Iowa City-area residents for weekend jaunts to Chicago, she added.

"This is very exciting and fits very well into our community," Bailey said.

Culver wasn't at Friday's event but issued a statement describing regional inter-city passenger rail service as a positive alternative to highway and air travel.

Ridership aboard Amtrak trains nationwide has been increasing and is expected to hit a record of 28.8 million passengers this year, said Ray Lang, Amtrak's senior director of national state relations. Fourteen states, including Illinois, pay Amtrak to run state-subsidized passenger trains.

The response to the report from the host freight railroads that own the tracks on the proposed Iowa City-Chicago route has been favorable, said Mike Franke, Amtrak's assistant vice president for state and community partnerships. He described the study's findings and estimates as "very solid," adding that none of the challenges faced in launching the route appear to be insurmountable.

"Judging by the enthusiasm here, I think we may have trains running here in a few years," Franke said.

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