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Amtrak mulls new routes

By: Megan Stephenson - The Daily Iowan

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A trip from Iowa City to Chicago would cost an estimated \$25 and take fewer than six hours without ever setting tire on Interstate 80.

A recently released Amtrak study found that proposed service from Iowa City to the Quad Cities would be financially feasible and had support from both local citizens and legislators. The plan will go before the Iowa Legislature during the 2009 session.

The study is an extension of another Amtrak study that had equally positive results of a passenger train service from the Quad Cities to Chicago. If that route is approved for funding, the Iowa City route will most likely follow suit, and Amtrak would offer passenger-train service from Iowa City to Chicago.

Students have already expressed interest in this potential service, especially those from the Quad Cities. A one-way ticket from Iowa City to Chicago will likely cost around \$25, said Marc Magliari, an Amtrak spokesman.

"For students who don't have cars, as long as the train station was within walking distance of campus, this could be a big time-saver for parents who would otherwise have to come get their children for the weekend," said Kelly Stavnes, a senior at the UI who is from the Quad Cities.

UI junior Allison Miller, who is also from the Quad Cities said she would use the train for lack of other transportation.

"I probably would [ride] from the QC to Chicago," she said. "That would be pretty handy actually."

Iowa City Mayor Regenia Bailey said she has waited a long time for this day and that Amtrak "would enhance what we already think of as a great place to live."

The Iowa route would cost between \$26.1 million and \$32.5 million, depending on how fast the trains would travel. The study examined both a 60-mph and a 79-mph train.

The numbers also pointed to high revenue but relatively stable operating costs at higher speeds, which means a lower annual operating cost for Iowa. A contract would split the annual costs among Chicago, the Quad Cities, and Iowa City, sharing around \$6 million. At a lower speed, the contractors would have to pay up to \$7.2 million.

The route would most likely go over the Iowa Interstate Railroad, which bought the old Rock Island Railroad line. The Rock Island "Rocket" line used to service Iowa City, but the train was discontinued in 1978.

Eliot Keller, the excursion chairman of the Iowa Association of Railroad Passengers, was pleased with this study, having been lobbying for passenger rail service for more than 20 years.

"It's significant that the governor supports this project," he said. "It's a significant amount of money, but when you look at the cost of other projects, [this] is amazing. A tremendous bargain."

Iowa Gov. Chet Culver supported the service in a statement.

"Rail service has tremendous advantages in terms of reducing our dependence on fossil fuels and foreign sources of oil [and] slowing the growth of highway congestion and associated pollution," he said.

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