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Article published: Apr 18, 2008

## **Amtrak says Quad City to Iowa City route could work**

**IOWA CITY** Iowa rail passenger service backers have their eyes on Illinois after an Amtrak study released Friday indicated extending rail passenger service proposed from Chicago to the Quad Cities on to Iowa City is feasible.

Amtrak delivered the welcome news Friday that the route extension to Iowa City would not require huge public subsidies to operate. Findings on an earlier study of rail passenger service from Chicago to the Quad Cities were also positive, but the Iowa General Assembly has not yet acted on a recommendation to fund that service.

Iowa City has not had rail passenger service since the Rock Island Railroad dropped its service in the early 1970s, but the old Rock Island depot on Wright Street remains potentially usable with some upgrades and renovations.

Creating the service would require an initial public investment of about \$32.5 million mainly for track upgrades, active signals

"Actually, the numbers are much better than I would have predicted," said State Rep. Dave Jacoby, D-Coralville, who sponsored a bill that brought Iowa into the Midwest Interstate Rail Passenger Compact. "The only piece I thought was missing was throwing in that rail link to Cedar Rapids."

Amtrak expects the Iowa segment of the route to generate between 60,700 and 76,100 passengers per year, many of them trips generated by the University of Iowa in Iowa City. That would roughly double Amtrak's current Iowa ridership on the California Zephyr and Southwest Chief, which totaled about 61,377 in 2006.

Universities are magic when it comes to generating rail passengers, explained Ray Lang, Amtrak senior director of National-State Relations.

Illinois' growing rail passenger program could not be viable without the strong traffic generated by Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, Northern Illinois University and the University of Illinois, Lang said.

A letter from Iowa Gov. Chet Culver supporting the route was read by Nancy Richardson, the Iowa Department of Transportation director who requested the study, and has since requested a second study of continuing the service to Des Moines.

Richardson said enthusiasm for passenger rail service is at the highest level she has seen in her transportation career, driven by high fuel prices, growing congestion, and environmental concerns.

As a practical matter, the proposed service has no chance unless Illinois goes ahead with its recommended service to the Quad Cities. Coming up with Iowa's roughly \$32.5 million share of the capital improvements needed for the route would be the biggest obstacle to making the project reality.

Iowa and Illinois would have to work out a way to come up with about \$6 million per year in subsidies for the route, a fairly modest amount compared to new passenger rail service being considered elsewhere in the United States.

A 79-m.p.h. route would require the lowest projected subsidy — \$6 million — but would also require the highest capital costs — \$54.9 million — for the two states combined.

Iowa City Mayor Regenia Bailey said demand for Chicago service isn't limited to university students from Chicago.

"For many years, I have heard Iowa City residents say, "If only there was a train I could go to Chicago for the weekend."

Bailey said the depot's owners are excited about the potential of bringing it back to its original function.

Richardson said the effort to bring rail to Iowa City will be a "true partnership." She said two Iowa congressmen serving on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Democrats Leonard Boswell and Bruce Braley, are in a position to help Iowa secure needed funding assistance.

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