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## Support puts Amtrak service on right track

By [Brian Morelli](#)  
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Key players engineering plans for Amtrak passenger train service between Chicago and Iowa City say they are on the right track, and the biggest impediment, funding, won't derail the project.

Based on two daily round trips running at 79 mph, the service would draw 187,000 passengers per year, but necessary infrastructure upgrades would cost \$54.9 million, according to an Amtrak feasibility study released Friday that was conducted on behalf of the Iowa Department of Transportation.

"Judging by the amount of turnout and enthusiasm in here, I think we might have a train here in a few years," said Mike Franke, an assistant vice president with Amtrak who led the study. "We are on the right track."

Leaders from Amtrak, the Iowa Department of Transportation, Iowa City, Quad Cities, Iowa Interstate Railroad and the state met in Iowa City on Friday morning touting a plan to establish train service with stops between Chicago to Moline, Ill., and direct service from Moline to Iowa City. Someday that service could extend to Des Moines.

The mix of supporters signals that several of the necessary partners already are all-aboard.

One-way fare for the suggested five hour ride could cost \$25 to \$68, based on a comparable route. The price difference is based on peak versus off-peak runs and discounts for advance purchases. Children's fares on Amtrak, for 2- to 15-year-olds, are half price.

The Iowa City to Moline component would be contingent on Illinois moving forward with the Chicago to Moline route, said Nancy Richardson, director of the Iowa Department of Transportation. Richardson thinks there is strong support in Illinois, Iowa and federally to make this happen.

"I've never seen a time when more energy has been devoted to passenger rail," Richardson said.

With rising gas prices, environmental concerns and the University of Iowa and its strong student base in Chicago, the groups think rail service would work here. Iowa City has not had train service since it lost its Rock Island Railroad service in 1970.

Among the costs, existing freight tracks would need upgrading to allow faster passenger trains, and more cars may need to be purchased.

Iowa City would have to establish a depot. The city is looking at the old depot on South Dubuque Street, which currently is privately owned, Mayor Regenia Bailey said, adding that the close proximity to the Court Street Transportation Center is a bonus. Bailey said it is too soon to gauge how much that would cost.

Bailey said the plans would motivate city leaders to seek funding more aggressively for an overpass on First Avenue to deal with traffic snarls from current freight train use.

Although Iowa City would provide the money for the depot, the overall project would rely on state and federal dollars.

Amtrak projections suggest there would be \$4.8 million in annual revenue from the Chicago-Iowa City line and operating costs of \$10.8 million. That means there would be \$6 million annually that would have to be picked up by city, state or federal dollars.

Richardson said her group would bring a funding plan for a passenger rail program to the state legislature next session.

Richardson and Amtrak leaders are optimistic about the chances of securing funding in Iowa, Illinois and federally. Amtrak leaders say passenger train patronage has been increasing around the country.

If funding were approved next session and "all the stars were aligned," Richardson said, the Iowa City-Chicago line could be up and running in three or four years. Amtrak officials said if funding were approved quickly, it could happen by the end of 2009, but a more likely estimate would be 2010 or 2011.

"This isn't the end, but it isn't the beginning," Richardson said.

[Return to article](#)