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Iowa City-Chicago rail service on track

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Iowa City, Ia. — An Amtrak passenger train between Chicago and Iowa City, via Davenport, would be expected to attract 187,000 passenger annually, Amtrak officials said today.

An Amtrak study released today at a press conference at the University of Iowa said the ridership forecast is based on twice-daily round trips and if improvements are made allowing train speeds of 79 mph. Many U of Iowa students are from Illinois and could be expected to be regular riders on the train along with Iowa residents.

The states of Iowa and Illinois would share the capital investment costs and the estimated annual Amtrak operating expense of about \$6 million. The estimated cost to upgrade the railroad tracks to accommodate passenger rail cars is \$54.9 million, officials said.

Today's report is the second phase of a study that previously explored the feasibility of passenger rail service between Chicago and the Quad Cities. A third phase of the study will be completed later this year examining the possibility of extending the Amtrak route from Iowa City to Des Moines on the Iowa Interstate Railroad's tracks, which run parallel to Interstate Highway 80 in Iowa.

Nancy Richardson, director of the Iowa Department of Transportation, said her agency will work with Amtrak and Illinois transportation officials to determine the next steps towards making the route a reality.

"In light of escalating fuel prices, congested interstates and the environmental impacts of highway transportation.....opportunities such as rail passenger service need to be seriously examined," Richardson said.

Amtrak President and Chief Executive Officer Alex Kumnant issued a statement which said, "State-supported routes are the fastest growing part of our business. We look forward to working with Iowa and Illinois to meet with the host railroads and take the next steps to initiate this service."

Iowa Gov. Chet Culver also issued a statement, calling regional intercity passenger rail service a positive alternative to highway and air travel.

"Rail service has tremendous advantages in terms of reducing our dependence on fossil fuels and foreign sources of oil; slowing the growth of highway congestion and associated pollution; energy conservation; and lifestyle enhancement through improved mobility for persons who either cannot or simply do not want to drive or fly," Culver said.

"That's why passenger rail service has a bright future in America and why we are going to have to give it a higher priority in moving people to Iowa," Culver added.

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

The Illinois report found the best route between Quad Cities and Chicago would use a portion of the former Rock Island Lines, now owned by the Iowa Interstate Railroad, from the Quad Cities to a

proposed track connection to the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway near Wyanet, Ill. The choice of the route is also enhanced by taking advantage of recently improved railroad stations at Princeton, Mendota and Naperville, Ill., officials said.
