

Despite setbacks, Iowa Amtrak boosters push for more passenger trains

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It's doubtful conductors will be shouting "all aboard" anytime soon in Iowa City or Des Moines, but that isn't stopping Iowa supporters of railroad passenger service from enthusiastically promoting more Amtrak train routes.

A long-debated proposal to expand passenger rail service in Iowa remains under study by the Iowa Department of Transportation, keeping the issue alive. But there are no immediate plans to add new long-distance trains, according to state officials, and ridership on Iowa's existing Amtrak trains is down slightly over the past year.

Christopher Krebill of Davenport, a supply chain analyst who heads the Iowa Association of Railroad Passengers, a rail service advocacy group, is undeterred. He remains hopeful about establishing a twice-daily train route between Chicago and Iowa City, perhaps within the next five years.

"I love this state and I love the rail service that we have now," said Krebill, a recent graduate of Iowa State University who grew up on a farm in Lee County and has ridden passenger trains to Chicago, Washington, D.C., and other cities. "I believe that having train service in central and northern Iowa, and doubling train service on Amtrak's current two routes would do great things for Iowa's transportation network and Iowa companies and people."

The Iowa City train, which would also serve the Quad Cities, would operate at a top speed of 79 mph with an estimated 187,000 passengers annually. But ultimately, Krebill would also like to see Iowa rail passenger service extended to Des Moines with rail connections to Omaha, Kansas City and Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Krebill led a pro-Amtrak rally in Fort Madison in June that attracted railroad passenger supporters who opposed efforts by President Donald Trump to slash federal funding for Amtrak service. Trump's justification was that long-distance rail service is often not on time and operates at a financial loss. But Congress rejected the president's plans.

Jim Larew of Iowa City is a lawyer who was policy director and chief legal counsel to former Gov. Chet Culver, a Democrat, when plans were initially proposed for expanded Iowa rail service in 2010. He said he still firmly believes that Chicago-to-Iowa City passenger trains would be attractive to key demographic groups that include college students, young professionals and older Iowans. In Iowa, the train would operate on the Iowa Interstate Railroad's tracks.

"My own view is that this is just a matter of when, not if," Larew said. "The model will always fit to have passenger rail service from Chicago to Iowa City, and then over to Des Moines and possibly Omaha."

Amtrak currently operates two daily long-distance trains through Iowa that travel between Chicago and the West Coast. They include the Southwest Chief, which stops in Fort Madison; and the California Zephyr, which serves stations at Burlington, Mount Pleasant, Ottumwa, Osceola and Creston.

Total Amtrak ridership in Iowa for the 12 months ending Sept. 30 was 60,585 passengers, a decline of 1.3 percent compared to the prior federal fiscal year. Amtrak's best year ever in Iowa was in 2010, when 68,744 persons rode trains.

Nationally, Amtrak reported record ridership of 31.7 million passenger trips for its latest fiscal year, as well as record revenue of \$3.2 billion. The rail service also had its best cost recovery ever, covering 94.7 percent of its operating expenses with ticket sales and other revenue.

"We provided a vital transportation service to more customers and created strong value for the federal investment," said Amtrak Board Chair Tony Coscia in a prepared statement. "And we're going to do even better. Over the next several years, we're aiming to cover total operating costs from ticket and other revenues by strengthening our services and continuing to drive efficiency. To do this, we are making investments in tracks and stations, on our trains, and in the delivery of customer service so that we can serve more customers with a better experience."

However, the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington, D.C., is no fan of Amtrak. The organization in a policy paper argues that Congress should privatize Amtrak and allow the passenger rail company to shed uneconomic routes and restructure its operations and labor force.

Amtrak, which was created in 1970, has many woes, according to the institute, including an expensive union work force with rigid union work rules. Amtrak has consumed more than \$40 billion in federal subsidies over four decades and many routes have low ridership and lose money, the policy paper says.

"Rail carries few people compared with automobiles and airplanes, and in many U.S. corridors, rail makes little economic sense. However, entrepreneurs could bring enough cost cutting and innovation to passenger rail to make it more competitive and financially viable," according to the Cato Institute.

Iowa officials, led by former Gov. Chet Culver, worked with Illinois seven years ago with the goal of establishing passenger trains between Iowa City and Chicago and eventually to Des Moines and Omaha. The federal government awarded a \$230 million federal grant for the project, but the initiative has been repeatedly sidetracked.

Officials in both states had envisioned an Iowa City-to-Chicago passenger train could be operational in 2015 or perhaps even earlier. But efforts to add more passenger trains have stalled in Iowa because Republican legislators have balked at providing a state share of funding, saying if passenger trains are viable they should be operated by the private sector.

At one time, Iowa's state share of the train project was estimated at \$20 million, plus annual operating subsidies, although current costs would likely be higher. Plans for the train in Illinois are on hold as well.

However, the Iowa Department of Transportation continues to work on preliminary engineering and environmental studies of proposed rail passenger service between the Quad Cities and Iowa City on the Iowa Interstate Railroad's tracks, said Amanda Martin, the DOT's railroad passenger and freight policy coordinator. The research will continue until sometime in 2018, she added.

In September, the Illinois DOT reached an agreement with the Federal Railroad Administration to extend a federal grant for the Chicago-to-Quad Cities route until June 2018, said Kelsea Gurski, the Illinois DOT's bureau chief of communications services.

The extension will allow the Illinois DOT to continue working with the Iowa Interstate Railroad on preliminary engineering studies that will determine the full scope of improvements necessary to facilitate passenger trains between Wyanet and Moline, Illinois, Gurski added.

"A timeline for the overall project will be ready once these studies are completed and construction and service agreements are in place with the Iowa Interstate Railroad," Gurski said.

Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, a Republican who was inaugurated in May, has not yet taken a position on expanded passenger rail service in Iowa, said Brenna Smith, Reynolds' spokeswoman. She said it's too soon to begin discussing state funding because the Iowa DOT's studies are still underway.

State Sen. Matt McCoy, D-Des Moines, who has pushed for state funding for passenger rail service in the past, told the Des Moines Register he remains a supporter of high-speed railroads. He sees a potential opportunity for Iowa if Congress approves plans to increase federal infrastructure spending.

One of the projects that might qualify for additional federal money is a Chicago-to-Iowa City passenger train, McCoy said.

"That doesn't mean that Iowa will participate in a state share of money for the project, but I get the feeling that Illinois would at least bring the train to the Quad Cities. Then it would be up to us to determine if we want it to go any further," he added.

Richard Harnish, executive director of the Midwest High-Speed Rail Association, a Chicago-based advocacy group, said he expects major improvements in passenger rail service in the next year on a route between Chicago and St. Louis, as well as Chicago to Detroit. Although Iowa doesn't have the population density of some other states, he contends there should be opportunities for more passenger trains.

"It should be possible to go to downtown Des Moines and to take a train that is faster than driving to get to Chicago or Omaha, and the state should be working aggressively to make that happen," Harnish said.

Amtrak has never operated scheduled passenger trains to Iowa City, which lost its Rock Island Lines' passenger rail service in 1970, or to the Quad Cities, which had service terminated in 1978, officials said. Des Moines has not hosted regular passenger trains since May 31, 1970,

when the Rock Island Lines' Cornbelt Rocket made its last run between Chicago and Council Bluffs.