



## **Editorial: Amid federal instability, Illinois can't sit on rail project**

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Dawdling isn't an option in this political environment. Especially if Quad-Cities ever hopes to get rail service between Moline and Chicago.

It's imperative that Illinois release its full \$45 million share for the project as soon as possible. Another extension from U.S. Department of Transportation might not be forthcoming.

The Trump administration in particular has made no bones about its willingness to commingle politics and policy, and punish Democratic strongholds for merely being the opposition. Last month, one of the top economic advisers from President Donald Trump's campaign, Stephen Moore, flatly admitted that the then-incomplete federal tax bill would hammer states where the historically divisive president is less than popular.

"It's death to Democrats," Moore told Bloomberg News.

The facts on the ground have changed since Moore's analysis. House and Senate negotiators have tweaked some of the harshest provisions that would have disproportionately punished residents of high-tax, traditionally blue, states. The changes were out of pure necessity. The support of a centrist Republican or two -- representing some these high-tax states -- will be required if the legislation is going to survive the Senate. But the intent -- to hurt "liberals" -- should concern anyone with a pet project in a state known for Democratic power.

Now, consider the long-anticipated passenger rail service between Moline and Chicago. Illinois is very much a blue state. Chicago has become one of Trump's favorite caricatures of liberal policies run amok whenever crime or gun control comes up. And, frankly, Gov. Bruce Rauner, a

Republican, faces a tough re-election campaign and has done everything he can to avoid even uttering Trump's name.

Taken as a whole, it's not unreasonable to wonder if that \$177 million U.S. Department of Transportation has held for nearly eight years will actually be there if Illinois continues to drag its feet. Illinois' state budget, finally adopted this summer after two years, includes cash for preparatory work. But the federal money requires the state to fully meet its end of the deal. The paltry \$3 million for the rail line in Illinois' 2018 budget, as reported by WQAD, isn't going to cut it.

Trump talked a lot about infrastructure on the campaign trail. But, even then, his focus was, and remains, on private investment in roads and bridges. Conservative think tanks hold outsized influence in this White House and, almost universally, these groups can't stand Amtrak. For years, organizations such as the CATO Institute have called for Amtrak's privatization. There's little reason to believe that Trump's DOT has any love for a new federally subsidized rail line, especially one serving deep blue Chicago.

Local government and private business have carried their ends. Moline and the private sector have invested millions into the multi-modal station. But it could easily become a station without a train.

For years, Illinois has sat on its hands and assumed federal officials would hold on to that \$177 million. Over and over, Illinois DOT requested extensions from feds. Even under the most ideal conditions, it would be unreasonable to expect that kind of cash would sit untouched for nearly a decade.

These are not normal times.

This is a White House that's extraordinarily willing to penalize states that don't qualify as Trump country. Congress is nearing a vote on a massive tax overhaul that would add \$1.5 trillion to the deficit over the next decade, according to a raft of official and third-party analyses. And the Republican Rauner hasn't curried favor with the president, which seems to be the most powerful tool within this White House.

For years, Illinois has assumed a federal grant would be there when it finally decided to carry its weight. The risks were always that the political landscape could change and threaten the project.

American politics have evolved since 2010. They're punitive, nasty and impulsive. They're subject to the whims of a president who lives in a binary world of friends and enemies. Under these conditions, it's increasingly likely that the long-sought federal cash for rail service to Moline could go up in smoke if Illinois doesn't release its share soon.