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Iowa City-Chicago Amtrak route a poor use of public funds

BY **DI EDITORIAL BOARD** | NOVEMBER 04, 2010 7:20 AM

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The project is being hailed as a win for the environment, an efficient way for scores of University of Iowa students from Illinois to get back home. And just recently, the federal government pledged \$230 million to Iowa and Illinois to build a passenger rail line between Iowa City and Chicago.

But the line is not an efficient use of taxpayer money and resources, and the proposed project is a mistake. Rail is not the fastest, nor the cheapest, nor the most efficient mode of transportation for the route. Our government should not spend \$310 million on a rail line that would have a minimal effect on Iowa's economy and fail to transport riders efficiently.

The Obama administration compares the proposed high-speed rail system to the interstate highway system, asserting that passenger rail will revolutionize transit in America. Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute specializing in urban growth, public land, and transportation issues, said this comparison is false. O'Toole wrote a report opposing the rail line.

Interstates are far better connected, going to virtually all of America's major urban centers, while the proposed rail travel would serve roughly one-third of such population centers. In addition, highways are 10 times more cost effective at moving people, according to a briefing O'Toole wrote called "High Speed Rail is Not Interstate 2.0." If the rail system is not well connected or cost effective, it is not worth subsidizing with tax dollars.

O'Toole said rail does make sense in some high-density areas. The most successful rail corridor is between Boston and Washington, which breaks even financially every year. Proponents of the rail line insist students from Illinois will use the rail line and make it financially solvent, projecting overall ridership of 246,800. But this assertion is unrealistic because of cost and travel time.

If a student goes online far enough in advance, he or she can buy a Megabus ticket to Chicago for \$1, and the trip takes about four hours. In contrast, the proposed train would take less than five hours and cost around \$40.

And the adjective "high-speed" is a misnomer. O'Toole said that while the top speed of the train will be 110 miles per hour, the average speed will be around 60 miles per hour. Students interviewed by the Editorial Board were skeptical about the route as well.

"I wouldn't take it," UI junior Jonathan Gonzalez said when asked about the rail line and told the projected cost and travel time. "It's far more economical in terms of time and money to take the bus."

"If it's cheaper than a bus ticket, it might be cool, but it'd be cheaper to drive there," said UI junior John Shepard. When faced with a \$40, not-quite-five-hour trip versus a \$1, four-hour trip, why would anybody pick the costlier option?

Bus travel is also far more energy efficient. Although freight trains are extremely efficient because of the amount of cargo that can be hauled in each car, passenger trains are far less efficient, even when they are full. Amtrak operates routes that only fill around half of its seats. Megabus usually operates routes where it can fill at least two-thirds of its seats.

Burlington Trailways is slightly more expensive and has more stops between Iowa and Chicago than Megabus, but the ridership in the areas in which rail travel would be a better option will not be enough to make the project financially prudent.

The bottom line is the cost versus the quality Iowans can expect with the rail service. The romantic atmosphere and smooth ride of passenger rail are not enough to offset its high cost and inefficiency.

Propping up a poorly used rail service is a poor decision by the federal, Iowa, and Illinois governments.

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