



Late and expensive no reason to stop Illinois' Amtrak support

By Ben Yount
March 26, 2015

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. — Buy a ticket for an Amtrak train in Illinois, and your chances of being late are one in three. There's also a good chance the train is half empty. But that's no reason to stop the \$42 million a year Illinois spends on Amtrak.

Or, at least, that's what train advocates like Rick Harnish, executive director of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, say.

"We're on the cusp of a really exciting new day for Amtrak service. But we have to get there," Harnish said. "That means no cutbacks in service now."

Illinois is broke.

The state's budget is going from about \$36 billion this year to just more than \$31 billion next year.

Gov. Bruce Rauner, who has proposed slicing state spending on just about everything but schools, has targeted Illinois' Amtrak spending.

Rauner wants to spend \$26 million on trains, or \$16 million less than his Democratic predecessor.

The High Speed Rail Association says spending even a tiny bit more could result in doom and gloom.

"The risk is that if (Gov. Rauner's budget) is implemented, we'll lose all of that exciting momentum," said Dan Johnson, the Rail Association's government affairs representative. "And the tens of millions or hundreds of millions of dollars in real estate development that certainly occurred in Normal ... because there are five trains a day."

The Rail Association says Illinois could be forced to repay the federal government for high-speed rail projects that could cost \$1 billion.

But that's a bit much.

The Illinois Department of Transportation, which received the high-speed rail grant, says high-speed rail work is in no way related to Amtrak service, and the state wouldn't have to repay anything.

Normal, back in 2012, used \$30 million in federal money — including the state's first stimulus grant — to build a new Uptown Station.

That building is also home to Normal's new town council chambers and a parking deck.

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said Amtrak isn't worth funding because it carries too few people and can't stand up to competition.

“It is almost a religious issue for many people such that their rational skills disappear when they look at rail subsidies,” O'Toole said. “If all subsidies to all forms of transportation ended, your airline fares probably wouldn't change at all — unless you flew to a small town — your auto costs would increase by, perhaps, 2 cents per vehicle mile, your Amtrak ticket prices would double and your transit fares would quadruple.”

Amtrak runs 56 trains a day in Illinois along five lines. The Chicago to St. Louis and Chicago to Carbondale lines are among the most popular. Illinois also have service between Chicago and Milwaukee, Chicago and the Quad Cities, and Chicago and Quincy.

Marc Magliari, an Amtrak spokesman, said that without state support Amtrak would only run long-distance trains through the state.

If Illinois simply spends less, Magliari said, Amtrak would run fewer trains, and lawmakers would decide on the trains.

State Sen. Bill Brady, a Republican who represents Normal, said Illinois needs to get its spending in line, and that may include some cuts to Amtrak.

“Back when (Gov. George Ryan) was cutting ... we were able to revisit (Amtrak spending) and make it a better plan.” Brady said popular or profitable trains should continue, and others would go.

But the Amtrak spending cuts, like the rest of Illinois' to-be written budget, are probably months away.

Lawmakers are predicting — and planning for — a summer-long battle over the new governor's new spending plan.