

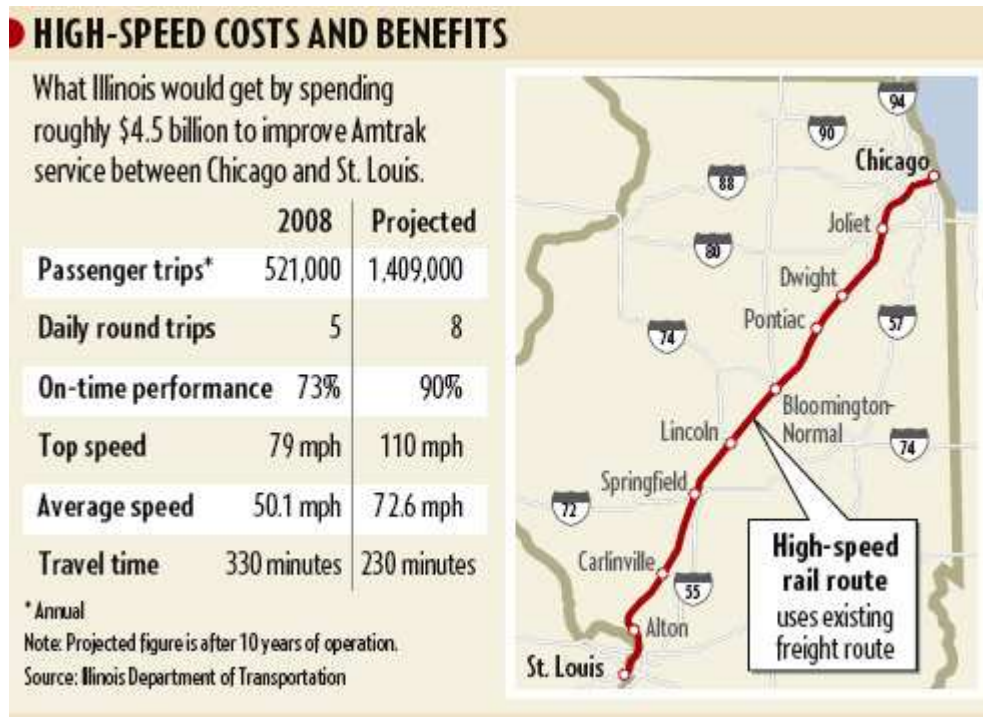
High-speed rail's price tag doubles

By Paul Merrion
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Illinois has nearly doubled the amount of funding it's seeking from Washington, D.C., to create a high-speed rail line that would cut the five-and-a-half-hour trip between Chicago and St. Louis to just under four hours.

In August, the state's preliminary estimates pegged the Chicago-St. Louis route improvements at about \$2.4 billion. But the state's latest estimate stands at \$4.5 billion, according to a proposal submitted to the feds this month.

Illinois first hopes to spend \$1.2 billion on long-planned improvements on the existing Chicago-St. Louis Amtrak route, which will reduce the travel time by 80 minutes. The additional \$3.2 billion the state now seeks is for a parallel second track along most of the route that would allow more freight and passenger trains to run at the same time. The double-tracking, however, will cut only another 20 minutes off the trip.



The plan is to bring top speeds to 110 mph Downstate, up from a maximum 79 mph today, while average speeds over the entire route would increase to 72.6 mph from 50.1 mph.

That's an improvement, but it doesn't conjure up images of bullet trains streaking through the French countryside.

"The state's plan is not high-speed rail," says Richard Harnish, executive director of the Midwest High Speed Rail Assn., which advocates a new, 220-mph Chicago-St. Louis route. "Four hours doesn't change a lot. It's not transformative. What is transformative is two hours."

That would cost \$12 billion to \$13 billion, he estimates, in line with a detailed, 256-page proposal for a complete Midwest high-speed rail system centered on Chicago that French National Railways, known by its French acronym, SNCF, filed recently with the Federal Railroad Administration.

At a cost of \$68.5 billion, SNCF says it would first build a Milwaukee-Chicago-Detroit route, connecting through O'Hare International Airport, followed by Chicago-St. Louis and other Midwest routes in the long-range future. Profits generated by the first route would pay for almost half the cost of building out the system, SNCF contends.

"We see the Midwest as an important and sustainable corridor for true high-speed rail," says Lindsay Simmons, an attorney for SNCF in Washington, D.C.

The latest cost estimates on the state's current Chicago-St. Louis proposal are forcing Illinois officials to sharpen their pencils, but the bid can't be fine-tuned before the feds allocate the money sometime this winter.

"It's a work in progress. We're doing everything we can, obviously, to bring down the cost," says George Weber, chief of the bureau of railroads for the Illinois Department of Transportation.

With Chicago's status as the nation's rail hub, the state's longtime subsidization of passenger rail and its unprecedented clout with the Obama administration, Illinois is considered likely to get a big chunk of the \$8 billion in federal stimulus funds for high-speed rail to be disbursed soon, plus billions more expected in future years as Congress embraces one of the president's top priorities.

But Illinois is seeking more than half the total federal funding available for high-speed rail, even as 23 other states clamor for the same funds.

Illinois officials say more frequent trains are needed to increase ridership, and double tracking is needed to accommodate increased passenger and freight trains: Union Pacific plans to quadruple the number of freight trains it runs to 22 a day after a big new intermodal distribution center near Joliet ramps up in coming years.

"It's definitely worth it," says Kristi Lafleur, Gov. Pat Quinn's deputy chief of staff for economic development and recovery, noting that the estimate includes a 30% fudge factor for unforeseen contingencies. "It's definitely a conservative estimate that gives us the Cadillac of routes from Chicago to St. Louis."

There's also a \$150-million request to address rail traffic snags in the Chicago area, but that's only for "conceptual engineering" and environmental studies. No cost estimates for fixing the problems are given.

The state's final bid also added about \$500 million for highway crossings and other measures to quell opposition to increased train traffic through downtown Springfield, which threatened to derail the state's bid at the last minute.

Critics say the state's plan illustrates the exceedingly high cost of high-speed rail, even for incremental benefits, and suggest that Union Pacific pay for at least part of it.

"It's what economists call diminishing returns," says Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a

libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C., and a critic of high-speed rail. "It seems to largely be a subsidy to freight trains, which makes me wonder: Why does UP need a subsidy?"

Union Pacific is planning to donate the right of way alongside its existing track, but it doesn't intend to pay for double-tracking even though it eventually would own the improvements.

"But for these high-speed trains, we wouldn't be putting in a second line," says Michael Payette, assistant vice-president of government relations in Chicago for Omaha-based UP. "It's kind of hard for us to want to contribute."

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