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Culver to ride train to back Iowa routes

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Gov. Chet Culver will conduct a whistle-stop train tour of southern Iowa today, part of an ongoing campaign to promote the use of federal stimulus money to upgrade Iowa's passenger lines.

The push for more passenger train service has drawn support from Des Moines Mayor Frank Cownie, Iowa City Mayor Regenia Bailey and chambers of commerce leaders in several Iowa cities.

The plan would include new passenger routes between Dubuque and Chicago and between Iowa City and Chicago, with eventual service extending west to Des Moines and Council Bluffs.

Culver is scheduled to start his tour at 7:30 a.m. in Creston, with a final stop planned at 3:35 p.m. in Burlington.

But not everybody supports the federal stimulus money train, which includes upgrading passenger rail corridors nationwide, starting with an \$8 billion commitment from Congress.

Critics say rail speeds to be too slow in Iowa

Some critics view the plan as a waste of money that could eventually cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars for a full-fledged national high-speed passenger railroad system. They claim that what is described as high-speed rail will be a slow trip in Iowa.

"High-speed rail has become the 'hip' kind of pork this year," said Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C.

But too few people will ride trains for the money spent, he said.

Samuel Staley, director of urban growth and land-use policy at the Reason Foundation in Los Angeles, which promotes free markets, said, "This isn't the 1950s, when intercity rail made a tremendous amount of sense. You can't ignore the fiscal realities that these systems are operating on.

"If you are in a state like Iowa with decent air service that will get you to Chicago within an hour, it doesn't make sense."

Gustave de Saint Victor of Iowa City, who has ridden high-speed trains in Europe as a graduate student at England's Oxford University, questioned why anybody would want to ride the moderate-speed trains proposed for the new Iowa routes.

The proposed train between Iowa City and Chicago, via the Quad Cities, would take 4 hours 58 minutes over 222 miles. The train could reach a peak speed of 79 mph, Amtrak officials said, but its average would be 45 mph.

Travelers could drive from Iowa City to Chicago via interstates in 3 hours 43 minutes, more than an hour faster than the train.

Its projected ridership for two daily round trips is estimated at 187,000 passengers annually, officials said. That is an average of 128 passengers per trip.

"It just seems so bogus what they are saying," de Saint Victor said. "It seems like propaganda to call it a 79 mph train when it won't go that fast."

An Amtrak spokesman in Chicago issued a statement in response to critics of the federal stimulus funding for high-speed rail projects nationally, noting that Amtrak already operates more than half of its daily trains at 100 mph or greater.

Rail improvements necessary in Iowa

The Iowa City train would require \$32.5 million for Iowa track improvements on the Iowa Interstate Railroad, plus equipment costs of \$1.9 million and annual operating subsidies of \$1.6 million, state officials said. Upgrading tracks between Iowa City and Des Moines for passenger trains would cost an additional \$106 million.

The proposed route between Dubuque and Chicago on Canadian National tracks would be even slower than the Iowa City train, requiring 5 hours 10 minutes for a 178-mile trip. That's an average speed of 35 mph.

That train, with one round trip daily, is projected to attract up to 74,500 passengers per year, or an average of 100 per trip.

Richard Harnish, director of the Midwest High-Speed Rail Coalition, a Chicago advocacy group, said the new rail service proposed for Iowa should be viewed as "quick-start" projects that can be running quickly.

The passenger trains could eventually operate at much faster speeds "if Iowans make it clear to their legislators that they want it to be as good as it can be," he said.

Tammy Nicholson, director of the Iowa Department of Transportation's Office of Rail Transportation, said passenger rail service should be viewed as a key component of the state's overall transportation system.

"In order to deal with growing highway congestion for both freight and passengers, we have to utilize these other corridors that we have for transportation," she said.

Rail upgrades eligible for federal money

Culver aide Troy Price said the governor believes the benefits of passenger rail outweigh the negatives.

"Studies show that passenger rail increases mobility options, improves the economic viability of an area, leads to greater investment in communities, and reduces fuel use and carbon emissions," Price said.

The Iowa Department of Transportation is seeking \$46 million from the Federal Railroad Administration to support three passenger rail applications for federal stimulus money.

This includes \$2 million for planning along the entire Chicago-Omaha corridor, plus \$44 million to reduce congestion and delays on the Burlington Northern Santa Fe line through southern Iowa, which carries Amtrak's California Zephyr passenger train between Chicago and northern California.

Additional stimulus applications are due Oct. 2 for passenger rail service between Iowa City and Chicago and Dubuque and Chicago, Iowa officials said.

Culver to ride train today

Gov. Chet Culver will ride on the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway's line across Iowa today. The stops:

7:30 a.m.: Creston

9 a.m.: Osceola

10 a.m.: Chariton

10:30 a.m.: Albia

11:30 a.m.: Ottumwa

1:15 p.m.: Fairfield

2:15 p.m.: Mount Pleasant

3:35 p.m.: Burlington

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