

Rail study confirms viability of Midwest route

A consortium of nine Midwestern states recently released an updated report on the Midwest Regional Rail System (MWRRS), which confirms the viability of a plan to enhance rail passenger service throughout the Midwest, including Iowa. The proposed rail passenger network radiates from Chicago, providing service to most major Midwestern cities and other population centers through a feeder bus system.

Providing a safe, reliable, comfortable, and convenient service using modern trains traveling at speeds of up to 110 mph (largely in existing rail corridors) is the goal of the system. The MWRRS is expected to carry an estimated 13.6 million passengers annually by 2025, and provide additional travel options for business and leisure travelers throughout the Midwest.

The proposed passenger rail system would mean good news for Iowans, as it would include five round-trips each day between Chicago and Des Moines with stops in some of the state's largest cities including Davenport and Iowa City; and interconnecting bus service to Waterloo, Cedar Falls, Fort Dodge, and Sioux City. The Chicago-Omaha route (including a branch to Quincy, Ill.) would run through Iowa on the current Iowa Interstate

Railroad. This route would be designed for 79-mph speeds and is expected to carry nearly 1.3 million passengers. The MWRRS is not expected to have a direct impact on existing Amtrak services, the California Zephyr through southern Iowa and the Southwest Chief through Fort Madison. The report assumes these services will continue to provide long-distance service from Chicago to California.

Implementation of the entire Midwest system carries a total capital cost of \$7.7 billion. This includes \$6.6 billion for track and signal improvements, and \$1.1 billion for state-of-the-art train equipment. The Chicago-Omaha route alone would require \$806 million in infrastructure improvements and train equipment. (These estimates are in 2002 dollars and do not account for inflation.) This investment is expected to create 2,000 permanent rail-related jobs and 8,000 temporary construction jobs. Once completed, the system will require subsidies initially, but is expected to become self-sufficient within 10 years of operation.

Federal support of a multi-year 80/20 federal/state partnership program is the essential element necessary for system development. The nine Midwest states, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin, are currently active with other interests in developing a coalition to ensure Congress and the Executive Branch are aware of the importance of passenger rail systems and the need for such a program.

“This is an incremental and phased plan for improved passenger rail service. However, it will require significant federal funding for it to be implemented,” said Iowa DOT Mark Wandro. “We are continuing our efforts with the other Midwest states to encourage Congressional action on passenger rail funding.”

For additional information, go to iowarail.com.

