

All aboard? Commuter rail could take 3 to 5 years

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Lynn Otte, project manager for TranSystems, talks about the findings of a recent report prepared for the Northern Illinois Commuter Transportation Initiative, as Jim Ryan, Rockford city administrator, looks on during a NICTI executive committee meeting Wednesday, April 30, 2008, at the Rockford Mass Transit District building.

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ROCKFORD —

The best-case scenario for a Metra-style commuter-rail line from downtown Rockford to the Chicago suburbs is three to five years.

It could take years longer to find the \$247 million to fund the project. So don't rush to find a Chicagoland job yet.

The Northern Illinois Commuter Transportation Initiative decided this morning that the best route for the new train line is through Belvidere to the Big Timber Metra station in Elgin. The preliminary plan would send four trains a day between Rockford and Big Timber and an additional two a day between Rockford and Bensenville.

The recommendation is for stations in downtown Rockford, at Perryville Road; at Irene Road in Boone County; and in Belvidere. There could be bus connections to Chicago Rockford International Airport, the Schaumburg area and the O'Hare International Airport area.

The group of government and economic-development leaders chose the route because it goes through the most populous areas of the region.

The Rockford Area Transportation Study, the local metropolitan planning organization, will vote on the recommendation in the coming weeks. The project needs the approval of RATS to move forward, but NICTI members make up the majority of the RATS policy committee so that's expected.

Many things stand in the project's way, though. The planners will do a federally required environmental study this year, then formally seek federal, state and local funds to pay for the project.

The project might not even qualify for federal funding, planners said today, because it costs too much per potential rider. Instead, they might have to pay for it through local bonds, state funding and partnerships with Metra, Amtrak and Union Pacific Railroad.

There could be a tax-increase referendum for Winnebago and Boone counties to pay for much of the project. If local government bonds to pay for \$200 million of the project, it would need property or sales-tax proceeds to pay it back over 40 years.

Details on a possible referendum would come together in the next few months.

Any state funding would likely come from a long-debated capital plan.

There was a lot of talk today about trying to get the Illinois Department of Transportation to move its proposed Amtrak service to this route to combine capital investment. Under that idea, Amtrak service would start first, and commuter rail later.

A commuter-rail line would have more frequent trains stopping in more places than Amtrak service would provide.

The commuter-rail service could draw 5,200 riders a day and 1.3 million riders a year.

NICTD has studied mass-transit options since late 2006.

Other options it seriously considered were a commuter rail route from Elgin through Genoa and Davis Junction to Chicago Rockford International Airport; and two "rapid-bus" routes along the Jane Addams Memorial Tollway (Interstate 90) from the Chicago suburbs to Rockford.

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