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COLUMNIST: **Chuck Sweeny**

Want a quick path to commuter rail? Try Albuquerque

Every once in a while I dust off that plan to bring commuter trains linking Rockford and Belvidere with Chicagoland's Metra rail system. I first started writing about this topic in 1997, when Boone County leaders had a meeting about it.

A decade has passed, and despite several million U.S. taxpayer dollars paid to consultants to study rail routes and other federally mandated but meaningless alternatives like "rapid bus," more lanes on Interstate 90 and "doing nothing," commuter trains are no closer to Rockford and Belvidere than they were in '97.

Local officials say we must be patient. These things take time. And they're right, at least in Illinois, which has not had a capital spending plan in half a decade. So, let's look at a place where there's a local, regional and state commitment to make commuter rail happen quickly.

We Illinoisans tend to think of New Mexico as one of those empty states in the wild, wild west. But the Albuquerque to Santa Fe corridor is growing fast. It's home to more than half the state's 1.9 million people. Traffic on Interstate 25 will double by 2025.

So, in fall 2003, Gov. Bill Richardson and the state legislature agreed to link the two cities and suburbs with commuter trains they call the "Rail Runner." (The state's symbol is the roadrunner.) It's a \$393 million project, according to the Santa Fe New Mexican newspaper. On July 14, 2006, the first commuter trains began running in Albuquerque and its suburbs. That's less than three years from political speeches to trains on tracks. The state is now extending Rail Runner to Santa Fe, partially in the I-25 median, with service to start in 2008. In the first six months, 300,000 people rode Rail Runner trains on the 50 miles currently in operation.

So, when they tell you commuter rail projects take lots and lots of time and study, tell them to go to Albuquerque.

Syverson and sales tax — State Sen. Dave Syverson has agreed to help speed collection of sales tax revenues if voters in Rockford approve the city's 1 percentage-point infrastructure sales-tax increase April 17. Syverson's bill would allow the city to get money from the tax starting in October, instead of April 2008.

This does not mean Syverson supports this referendum. He said he voted against the 2006 referendum, which also asked for a 1 percent sales tax, but didn't campaign against it. He said he's neutral on this year's measure. But when I talked to Syverson on the phone Wednesday, he was skeptical of the city's tax plan.

"I am concerned with the size of the increase. I wish there had been a compromise plan passed for a smaller amount," he said. Syverson also said he believes big road projects should be funded by borrowing money.

"Bonding is the way it's been done. Everyone else does it. You don't go out and pay cash for major road reconstruction projects," Syverson said.

Does Dave sound neutral to you? E-mail me with your IOD: Interpretation of Dave.

Reach Political Editor Chuck Sweeny at 815-987-1372 or csweeny@rrstar.com.

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happycamper wrote:

Mr. Sweeny,

I have waited a very long time to have the perfect opportunity to respond to one of your inaccurate accounts of the Northern Illinois Commuter Transportation Coalitions' work. Thank you very much for providing me this article today. The funding for these projects is not the same, and that is the crux of the reason for NICTI's timeline. Let me explain:

The NICTI project is seeking Federal Transit Administration (FTA) New Starts funding for a transportation alternative in the Rock River Valley. The shortest project to ever move through this process and receive New Starts funding was 10 years, for a much shorter light rail project in Portland, OR. To date NICTI has only been in the Federal "Pipeline" for four years.

The RailRunner project, which provides commuter rail to the citizens of New Mexico, (a state I am a native of, still have immediate family residing in and a system I have actually ridden) has not, to this date, utilized any Federal funds. Instead, Gov. Richardson started what is termed NMDOT's GRIP (Gov. Richardson's Investment Partnership) and utilized over HALF of the State of New Mexico's ENTIRE transportation budget for state FY 2006 to fund the project, a budget that is roughly 1/12th of Illinois. This is why implementation of the project only took three years. The extension service from the Albuquerque region to Santa Fe is now looking to secure New Starts funding and is at the same point NICTI is. If you look at it that way, only now are the two projects like comparing "Apples to Apples". Now, let me ask you, do you think Illinois current downstate minded (this is sarcasm) Gov. Rod is going to take any serious state money and invest it in the Rockford region.

If you insist that this process is too slow and flawed, the why don't you lobby your beloved, civic minded Rockford Register Star and its parent company Gannett to enter into a Public Private Partnership with the Rockford Mass Transit District and run service as ya'll see fit. Until you are ready to offer true, well-researched, fact based commentary on this initiative, maybe you should just stop writing about it.

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