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Business: Transportation

Area options down to 4 on mass transit **The choices are two rail lines and two 'rapid bus' lines.**

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ROCKFORD — The easiest way to get to Chicagoland might be through Elgin.

Local planners studying a mass-transit link from the western suburbs to Rockford have narrowed the options to two rail lines and two "rapid bus" lines. The Northern Illinois Commuter Transportation Initiative is still on schedule with the \$3 million study, expecting a final choice by October and a push for federal funding the following spring. Actual construction wouldn't start until between 2012 and 2016.

All four options would connect to the existing Metra commuter rail system at the Big Timber terminal in Elgin. The group discarded options that would connect to Metra at Harvard, Elburn and Aurora.

"It's the closest point that a transportation option, whether it's rail or bus, can tie into the existing transportation system," said John Dobies, project manager for consultant TranSystems.

To be sure they're going down the right road, planners have two open houses scheduled this week and will accept public comment for the next few weeks.

The rail lines would mostly follow existing freight tracks — one through Huntley and Belvidere to downtown Rockford and one through Davis Junction to the Chicago/Rockford International Airport and possibly downtown. The bus lines would both use the Northwest Tollway — one would require new lanes while the other would use existing lanes and shoulders.

The group jettisoned light rail and new bus-only roads because they were too costly for the increased benefit.

Now, members must conduct a deeper review of the four remaining options, taking into account potential ridership, environmental impacts, capital costs and ongoing maintenance needs. They also have to compare the options with doing nothing.

It's a long process prescribed by the federal government for any potential multimillion-dollar transportation project. Dobies compares it to creating a business plan before asking a bank for a loan.

"We're not looking for a commuter rail that's going to be here for a few weeks. We're looking at something that will last 50 to 100 years, so we've got to get it right," said Dave Taylor, a Boone County Board member who chairs the NICTI project.

A rail extension to Rockford could easily top \$100 million, group members said. A bus option would cost less upfront but have more long-term maintenance and equipment costs.

"Rapid bus" service could actually be as fast as or faster than train service, planners said, because the buses use their own lanes and avoid the stop-and-go traffic seen on municipal routes.

From the public comment the group has already gotten, it expects most people to be happy with the chosen routes. Dobies said growth patterns in the area show strong potential ridership on both lines, as Kane, McHenry, Boone, DeKalb, Ogle and Winnebago counties continue to grow.

Besides proving that people will use the new service, NICTI must prove an economic-development benefit.

Dobies said that's why the airport is one potential terminal — local leaders see its growing

passenger service and cargo operations as potential economic drivers that will increase as access is improved. Belvidere is another key, especially since the rail line would go right by the DaimlerChrysler plant.

Taylor noted the commercial growth in downtowns that have Metra stations now — he said Elgin has a lot more activity than it did in the past.

NICTI would also have to convince Metra, which handles constant requests to extend its lines, and the freight railroads that own the lines that this is a project worth joining. If a bus option is chosen, they'd have to work with the Illinois Tollway, which has its own plans for dealing with congestion on Interstate 90.

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