

# Leaders to study RMTD expansion for rail

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Local leaders think the best way to bring commuter rail here might be to expand Rockford Mass Transit District.

The Northern Illinois Commuter Transportation Initiative policy committee voted today to study that as its first choice for governing a new rail line to Chicago. They said RMTD is a well-regarded organization already serving Winnebago and Boone counties.

Members said they'd prefer not joining Chicago's Regional Transportation Authority, which runs Metra, because local residents wouldn't have much say in how their tax dollars are spent.

"If we can avoid getting into the messy politics of the RTA, they have a lot of stuff they're scrambling with all the time," Rockford Mayor Larry Morrissey said.

The challenge is how to fund commuter rail, which could cost \$200 up front and \$10 million a year in operating expenses.

Committee members are most in favor of funding rail by a sales tax increase in the two counties. Consultants say it could require a 0.25 percent to 0.5 percent tax, depending on how extensive the service is and what other funding is available.

But it would take a change in state law and a local referendum to pass a sales tax. A referendum could be scheduled as early as next year.

According to a survey conducted for NICTI, about a third of local residents supported a sales tax hike, another third supported other tax or fee hikes and a third didn't support any increases.

"A sales tax reduces the pain, people outside pay for it. ... But people don't want any pain." Boone County Board Chairman Bob Walberg said.

Consultants said a sales tax hike for mass transit never passes on the first try and will likely take two attempts.

Even if commuter rail isn't provided through the RTA, the service could use Metra on a contract basis. Amtrak is another option, separate from planned intercity service from Chicago through Rockford to Dubuque.

The route, which could start by fall 2013, would run from Rockford through Belvidere to Elgin, with possible continuing service to Bensenville. Commuters also could connect to Metra in Elgin. It could start with up to six or seven trains a day in each direction.

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