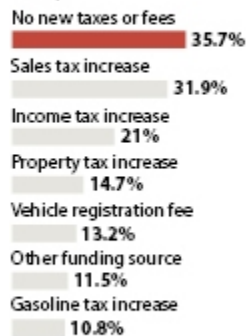


# Residents want rail, not sure on funding

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## Commuter rail funding

Local residents are split on how to fund commuter rail service from Rockford to Chicago, according to a recent survey.



Percentages don't add up to 100 because respondents could select more than one option

Source: Health Systems Research  
ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR

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By Thomas V. Bona

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ROCKFORD —

Most Rockford-area residents support a commuter rail link to Chicago but question how to pay for it, according to a recent survey.

About 60 percent of respondents in Winnebago and Boone counties said commuter rail is “among the highest priorities for the area” or at least is “very important.” An additional 24 percent said it’s “a very good idea, but funding is a major concern.”

More than a third of the respondents, though, said they wouldn’t support a tax or fee increase to pay for it.

Nearly a third supported a sales-tax increase of 0.25 percent, likely not including food and medicine, similar to Chicago’s Metra funding. Fewer people supported increases to their income tax, property tax, vehicle-registration fee or gasoline tax.

The survey was conducted by Health Systems Research, an applied research group at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford, for the Northern Illinois Commuter Transportation Initiative, a group of local leaders trying to bring commuter rail here.

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 six or seven trains a day in each direction.

But that plan would need \$200 million in capital money and \$10 million a year in annual operating funds. Planners will meet Tuesday to discuss the survey results and start narrowing down funding options. The group also will deliberate on who should oversee the new service.

NICTI project manager Steve Ernst said he expected sales tax to be the most popular option in the survey.

“Sales taxes generally tend to be a fairer tax when you look at the folks that use the service and pay for the service,” he said. “Property tax is probably not the model we want to follow, especially since property taxes tend to hurt the elderly and folks who are disadvantaged.”

The group hopes to choose a governing body for the service and a funding proposal in time for a referendum, if necessary, next year. A tax or fee increase might be needed not just to run the service, but to pay for bonds to upgrade tracks to handle commuter rail.

NICTI also is seeking federal funds, and Ernst hopes the Obama administration will be more favorable to projects like this one.

Contact staff writer Thomas V. Bona at 815-987-1343 or [tbona@rrstar.com](mailto:tbona@rrstar.com).