

# Panel eyes commuter plan: Rockford to Elgin

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ROCKFORD — A panel comprising several area agencies and state transportation officials is studying transportation options between this city and Elgin.

The study will evaluate a range of transportation options for the Elgin-Rockford corridor and identify the option or combination of options best meeting the needs of the corridor, according Dave Taylor, chairman of the Northern Illinois Commuter Transportation Initiative.

Taylor also represents Belvidere's Growth Dimensions economic development corporation on the initiative's board.

The initiative is an ad hoc committee of elected officials in Rockford and Belvidere, Growth Dimensions, the Rockford Area Economic Development Council, the Rockford Area Transportation Study and the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Prior studies identified a need to improve the transportation system in the Elgin-to-Rockford corridor.

While Rockford and Belvidere long have held positions as economic and cultural centers for the area, the region increasingly has forged new ties to the Chicago area. Physical transportation connections are limited to highways, with Interstate 90 being the most prominent.

"The Elgin-to-Rockford corridor is experiencing multiple transportation problems that threaten to limit mobility" between the cities, Taylor said. "The corridor not only supports existing commerce ... but also supports continued future population and commercial growth between these cities."

## Choosing an alternative

Conducting an "alternatives analysis" is a process to determine the best way to address Rockford's current and future transportation. It also is part of a program to secure federal funding for major transportation investments.

The preliminary project schedule calls for the selection of a locally preferred alternative by late 2007. The required environmental study would begin immediately after that alternative is selected and would take six months to complete.

The Federal Transit Administration must approve the findings before authorizing the project's next major phase — preliminary engineering.

"The selected alternative will not only support the region's economic growth, but will reinforce and expand the transportation and economic connection between Rockford and the Chicago region," said Rockford City Administrator Jim Ryan.

The study team will reach out to a wide range of stakeholder groups and encourage them to participate. By late September, the project is to offer an interactive Web site where the public will be able to comment and find updated information.

Plans also are under way to conduct public opinion surveys and focus groups to learn more about local and regional transportation needs. Although a date has not been scheduled, the first public information meetings are slated in November.

"The goal of this comprehensive study is to reach public consensus on the best transportation approach to achieve our goal of improving connectivity between the Rockford and Chicago metropolitan areas," Taylor said. TranSystems, in association with Parsons Brinckerhoff, will conduct the study. TranSystems has offices in Chicago and Schaumburg.

John Dobies, project manager for TranSystems, said the entire committee needs to approach the study with an open mind and evaluate the costs, benefits and overall effects on the economy. Although commuter rail seems to be a popular idea, Dobies said "there is no guarantee the study will recommend rail service."

While there are no committee members from Elgin, Taylor said city officials will be kept informed during the entire study process. He also noted that Metra is conducting a study of the feasibility of service between Elgin and Huntley.

"There is a lot of coordination required," Taylor said.