

Business

Planners seek Chicagoland traffic options Rock River Valley residents can weigh in on alternative transportation at two public meetings.

By Thomas V. Bona

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ROCKFORD — We all know Winnebago and Boone counties are growing. We all know lots of people commute into Chicago and its burbs for work and shopping.

We all know that, sooner or later, our roads will be overwhelmed because of those two trends.

But is what we all know really true? And if it is, what alternative transportation options are out there?

That, in a nutshell, is what members of the Northern Illinois Commuter Rail Initiative are trying to find out through a \$3 million study. Tonight and Thursday, the public can weigh in on what routes and transportation options they'd like.

That information, along with traffic data and growth projections for the area, will help planners whittle options and pick one by the end of next year. It'll also help them prove to the Federal Transit Administration that the project is worth funding.

"We have people who are commuting into the Elgin/Hoffman Estates area. We know I-90, we know in our gut right now, it's not going to be able to support that long term," said Jim Ryan, Rockford city administrator. "All of us have anecdotal evidence that our interaction with Chicagoland is there and growing, but the FTA won't go on anecdote."

The options include extending Metra commuter rail from places like Elgin, adding express bus service, widening the Northwest Tollway for bus-only lanes or a mix of the three. Planners also are required to study what would happen if nothing was done.

The study includes five potential rail routes using existing freight tracks. It's not related to the discussions about bringing Amtrak back to the area.

In order to qualify for federal funding, planners have to study a number of routes over a nine-county area. But as early as January, the least workable options will be weeded out so planners can focus on more feasible ones.

The Rockford Area Transportation Study, the regional transportation planning body for Winnebago and Boone counties, commissioned this study. RATS leaders hope to choose the preferred route in October and then finish an environmental report by the following spring. Then they'll lobby federal officials for funding.

They're optimistic, even as the next Congress considers changing budget priorities. U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., has supported the project for years and is expected to have more stature in the Democratic-controlled Senate. U.S. Rep. Don Manzullo, R-Egan, is also a longtime proponent.

There will be several more public meetings along the way. The meetings this week are more of a chance to get people on board with the study than to tell them where it'll end up, said Hayes Morrison, transportation planner.

"The idea is that you engage the public early and often," she said. "This is the early."

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Public meetings

Area residents have two chances this week to say what kind of transportation connections they want to see between Rockford/Belvidere and Chicagoland. Public meetings are scheduled to provide information on the study of whether rail and bus connections are feasible. Residents also can make comments or ask questions. The meetings are:

- 5 to 8 p.m. today, Rockford City Hall, 425 E. State St., Rockford
- 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday in the lower level of the Belvidere Community Building, 111 W. First St., Belvidere

What about Amtrak?

The Northern Illinois Commuter Rail Initiative study has nothing to do with the ongoing Amtrak study.

Amtrak is doing a feasibility study on three potential routes to restore passenger rail service to Rockford and communities as far west as Galena. The report is due back by early next year, Amtrak President Alex Kummant said last month, and would then go to state and local officials for further discussion and an eventual decision.

The state doubled its funding for Amtrak this year, leading to more round-trip service from Chicago to St. Louis, Carbondale and Quincy, but it's unclear where funding for a Rockford route would come from.

Amtrak service to Rockford ended in 1981.