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**Planners to meet today with Metra**

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ROCKFORD — The people trying to bring mass transit from Chicagoland to Rockford meet with Metra officials today to update each other on their projects.

The Northern Illinois Commuter Transportation Initiative is studying whether to extend commuter rail from Metra's Elgin terminal or a "rapid bus" line from the suburbs up the Illinois Tollway.

Metra officials, meanwhile, are considering an extension from Elgin to Marengo, as well as the STAR Line that would connect Joliet to O'Hare International Airport. NICTI's four proposed routes each would connect to one or both of those Metra projects.

"It was just to try to get some updated information from them and to let them know where we are," NICTI Chairman Dave Taylor said. "That STAR line, if that gets built, there's going to be a transportation center around Hoffman Estates, and we're wanting to see how that thing is shaping up."

NICTI and Metra officials have met several times since the local mass-transit study started.

The NICTI study is now focused on four options — two rail and two "rapid bus" routes. Officials will decide on the best plan by October, then start an in-depth environmental report and begin lobbying for federal funds next year.

NICTI's deputy project manager, Steve Ernst, said public input so far leans strongly toward a rail link. He said most people aren't familiar with "rapid bus" lines that use their own lanes on the highway.

Ernst said support is split among the two rail options — one would go through Huntley, Belvidere and downtown Rockford; the other would go through Genoa, Davis Junction and the Chicago/Rockford International Airport.

One topic that'll likely come up at today's meeting is the proposal to restore a Chicago-Rockford Amtrak route.

Amtrak officials are studying three routes, two of which NICTI officials also are considering. But while Amtrak could return by the end of 2009, commuter rail would be years after.

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