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Business: Transportation

Rail plans draw most support at meeting

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ROCKFORD — Don Robinson has been wishing for rail service from here to Chicago for at least 15 years.

"This is the closest we've gotten," he said Tuesday after a public meeting where planners talked about the two rail and two "rapid bus" routes to Elgin that they will be studying in the next few months.

Robinson, a Rockford resident, said it's a big step to have four concrete options. Moreover, by late fall, they will be narrowed to one.

About 50 residents went to Tuesday's open house for the Northern Illinois Consumer Transportation Initiative. A second meeting is tonight in Belvidere.

Residents seemed more interested in a rail link than a bus route, even if the latter was a "rapid bus" system along the Illinois Tollway that planners say can rival train speeds and reliability.

"All the roads, I think, would be too slow because they're too congested," Robinson said.

Residents said it was a tough call between the two rail routes — one would go through Huntley, Belvidere and downtown Rockford; the other would go through Genoa, Davis Junction and the Chicago/Rockford International Airport. Planners said both could include some kind of link between the airport and downtown.

"It's crucial, crucial that this include the airport," said Edward Geeser, a member of Next Rockford, a group of young professionals. "It's difficult to market the airport to people in the western suburbs if we don't offer an alternative to driving."

Jeff Orput of Rockford sees the importance of linking the airport, but also prefers the rail option that goes through Belvidere and downtown Rockford because he thinks it'll serve more people.

He said the best-case scenario is a line that goes downtown and to the airport, even if it has to come in phases.

Planners will decide on the best plan by October, then start an in-depth

environmental report and start lobbying for federal funds next year.

Throughout the process, they said, residents need to express their opinions and support to help federal officials decide to put their money here.

"In my experience," said John Dobies, project manager for the study's consultant, "nothing is more powerful than hearing from a lot of constituents on a matter."

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