

Rockford commuter-rail service efforts move along slowly

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ROCKFORD -

Efforts to bring commuter-rail or bus service to Rockford are moving forward, albeit at a pace that sometimes resembles the drive to Chicago.

Local planners hope to announce a proposed rail or bus line between Rockford and the northwest Chicago suburbs by early April. When their study started in late 2006, they hoped to finish by October 2007, but they've run into several delays.

The latest is the wait for a Chicago agency to prepare detailed ridership forecasts for each option. Once those forecasts are finished, local planners can choose the best one.

Previously, the study was delayed because of a logjam in the state budget last year.

But the length of the study is not out of the ordinary, planners say.

"A lot of people don't understand that most large transportation projects, whether it's commuter or Amtrak or a major highway investment, from planning to implementation is often more than 10 years," said Steve Ernst, assistant project manager for the Northern Illinois Commuter Transportation Initiative.

NICTI is considering two commuter-rail options and two "rapid-bus" options to link the Chicago suburbs with Rockford. Each rail option starts at Metra's Big Timber station in Elgin. One would go through Huntley, Belvidere and downtown Rockford; the other would go through Genoa and Davis Junction to Chicago Rockford International Airport.

The bus routes would come from the Elgin or Schaumburg areas along Interstate 90 to downtown Rockford.

Ernst said the study needs to take time so planners have all the information needed to seek federal funding for the projects. Incomplete information could stall the project even later, he said.

If a project is approved by the federal government, construction would start a few years after that.

NICTI officials say that if they choose a rail option, they'll ask Amtrak and state officials to consider using that route instead of the old Black Hawk line. Ernst said it's less likely the commuter-rail project would get federal approval without sharing tracks with Amtrak and sharing state investment in infrastructure.

Amtrak's Black Hawk line use tracks from Chicago through West Elgin, Genoa and Rockford. It would continue on to Freeport, Galena and Dubuque, Iowa.

That service could resume in 2009 or 2010, depending on whether and when state officials approve a capital plan to fund track improvements.

An additional factor is whether Canadian National, which owns the tracks, will let Amtrak service resume before the full improvements are complete.

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