



Illinois not alone in disputes over high-speed rail

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SPRINGFIELD -- Illinois isn't the only state where some local officials are balking at the prospect of having high-speed passenger rail service running through their communities.

Just as officials in Springfield are threatening to sue over the possible effects of having additional trains rolling through Illinois' capital city, the push to tap into billions of federal dollars to improve passenger rail service has been met with resistance in California towns like Menlo Park and Atherton.

In Florida, reports indicate opponents of a planned high-speed rail link near Orlando are concerned about the financial risk of the project.

While it remains unclear if those local concerns will dampen the chances of getting some of the federal largesse set aside by President Barack Obama, it is causing finger-pointing among high-speed rail supporters in Illinois.

In Illinois, state Rep. Elaine Nekritz, D-Northbrook, a major booster of high-speed passenger rail, worries that the outcry in Springfield could send federal money elsewhere.

"I think it could definitely have an effect on Illinois' chances and that scares me," said Nekritz, chairwoman of the House Railroad Industry Committee.

Impact on uptown Normal

State Rep. Dan Brady, R-Bloomington, agrees.

"My main concern is that people who review this in Washington will wonder why we aren't all on the same page. They could just say, 'Okay, let's look at other states,'" Brady said.

Along with adding faster trains, Brady is lobbying for money to complete a long-sought transportation center in uptown Normal that would serve Amtrak passengers and others.

With 180,589 passengers in 2008, the station in Normal is the fourth busiest station in the Midwest, behind Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Louis.

On Friday, Illinois' submitted its application for more than \$4 billion in high-speed rail money to improve train speeds on the Chicago-St. Louis route to 110 miles per hour, up from their current 79 mph average.

Springfield's opposition, which includes concerns about heavier freight traffic on a corridor that runs through the middle of the city, is barely mentioned in the 880-page application sent to Washington D.C. by the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Reports indicate the opposition in California is farther along, with lawsuits underway about the alignment of the proposed line running between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Attention of the key players

The dust-up in Springfield has drawn the attention of statewide leaders. House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, recently filed legislation that would bar the state from spending money on upgrading the tracks running through Springfield's mid-section.

A House committee was supposed to hear testimony on the proposal Wednesday, but that meeting was postponed in hope Springfield officials and IDOT would continue working to smooth out their differences.

"They seem to be indicating they are making some progress," said Madigan spokesman Steve Brown.

For sure, not everyone in Springfield is against the high-speed rail line.

In a letter to federal Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, University of Illinois-Springfield Chancellor Richard Ringeisen expressed support for the concept.

"The University of Illinois at Springfield will benefit significantly from the development of a high-speed rail system because many of our students live in the Chicago region and could get back and more much more efficiently," Ringeisen wrote. "We urge you to consider the benefits that high-speed rail would bring to our region and higher education in central Illinois."

In the application, IDOT envisions three of the current five trains running at 110 mph.

The state also wants money to complete improvements to stations at Dwight, Pontiac, Lincoln, Springfield, Carlinville and Alton. The work would cost \$7.4 million at each station, with most of the tab being picked up by the federal government.

A decision on where the federal money will be spent is expected to come in the first three months of 2010.

Supporters of Illinois' bid hope Springfield and state officials can iron out their differences in the coming months.

"I don't want the problems in Springfield to jeopardize what we've been trying to do in my district," Brady said. "The disruption is a distraction. It's definitely something we could do without."