

Iowa DOT wants feds to divvy up rail money

Move would allow work on Chicago-to-Q-C link to begin

By Ed Tibbetts

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The Iowa Department of Transportation has asked the federal government to divide the \$230 million federal grant it shares with Illinois for passenger rail service between Chicago and Iowa City into two parts.

The request, which hasn't been acted upon yet, would speed up construction of a link between Chicago and the Quad-Cities, officials say. But it also could slow down any eventual connection between the Quad-Cities and Iowa City. And a congressional supporter says it puts Iowa's part of the grant at risk.

In a letter last week, the Iowa DOT asked to split the grant, which was awarded last fall to Iowa and Illinois, adding it plans to embark on a study of a regional connection from Chicago to Omaha, Neb.



Branstad

Progress on extending passenger rail service to the Quad-Cities has idled for several months, as Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad and Republican lawmakers have balked at the annual \$3 million operating subsidy.

The split in the application would decouple the Illinois leg of the project, allowing it to move forward. "That's our primary goal right now," said Paul Rumler, a vice president of the Quad-Cities Chamber of Commerce and executive director of the Quad-Cities Passenger Rail Coalition.

An Illinois rail official said Tuesday it asked Iowa to make the request and is proceeding as if the decoupling will be approved. George Weber, the head of the rail bureau for the Illinois Department of Transportation, said it is now seeking to get the federal government to "obligate" the \$143 million planned for the Chicago-to-Quad-Cities link.

He said he hopes that can happen by the end of the month. "We're working feverishly to get it done," he said.

Getting that designation is important because it would protect the federal money from being taken back by budget cutters in Congress, officials say.

Earlier this year, a GOP-backed budget bill in the House rescinded unobligated money for rail projects, including the Chicago-to-Iowa City connection. The proposal died in the Senate.

An official with the Federal Railroad Administration would only say Tuesday that the

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agency is reviewing Iowa's request. But in a meeting Tuesday with U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood expressed his support for the Chicago to Quad-Cities link, a spokesperson for the senator said.

Durbin's office also said they had received word that \$10 million for the multimodal facility in Moline, an

important piece of the project, has reached the obligation stage.

In its letter, the Iowa DOT asked that the \$87 million in the original grant for Iowa's part of the project be "reserved" while it undertakes a feasibility study of extending a regional connection to Omaha. The DOT added it would study the possibility of faster train speeds than the maximum 79 mph service contemplated for the existing proposal. The study will take 18

months, said Tammy Nicholson, head of state's rail office.

Nicholson said the state has had "positive discussions" with the federal railroad administration, but she acknowledged the risk of losing money that isn't obligated.

All this takes place as a special congressional committee begins work on finding \$1.5 trillion in budget cuts over the next decade.

Jeff Giertz, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, who has backed the

project, said Tuesday it would take a "Herculean effort to keep this money from disappearing." And he blamed Branstad for not pushing for the rail project, saying the jobs it creates will "stop at the Illinois border."

Tim Albrecht, a Branstad spokesman, responded that the governor is taking a "thoughtful approach with Iowa's scarce tax dollars," and that he will review "all of the information before coming to a decision of this magnitude."

very or extremely offended if they saw someone using it online or in a text message. Thirty-five percent said it wouldn't bother them much, including fully 26 percent who wouldn't be offended at all.

Among African-American youth, however, 60 percent said they would be



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