

Funding released for rail link to Chicago

Work to begin in spring, expected to finish by 2014

By Kay Luna

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After more than four years of working and waiting, Quad-City area leaders were ecstatic Monday to learn that \$177 million in federal funding finally has been released for the new Chicago-to-Moline passenger rail corridor.

That means behind-the-scenes engineering and design work can begin on the project, now that a cooperative agreement has been settled between the Illinois Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration.

The funding was approved in October 2010, but hadn't been released for use until now, said Paul Rumler, a vice president of the Quad-Cities Chamber of Commerce and executive director of the Quad-Cities Passenger Rail Coalition.

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"By 2014, this will be a reality," Rumler said, adding that the rail service will improve transportation and quality of life, create jobs and stimulate the economy.

The project is expected to create 2,000 jobs.

The rail corridor will provide twice-daily trips between Chicago and the Quad-Cities, on trains traveling between 79 and 90 mph, Rumler said.

The line also will include intermediate stops in Geneseo, Princeton, Mendota and Plano, Ill., with infrastructure improvements that would include a new rail station in Geneseo, a layover facility in the Quad-City area, communication and signaling improvements and the purchase of new passenger rail equipment, according to a news release from the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Preliminary design work is under way at the new Quad-Cities Multi-Modal Station, across from the i wireless Center in Moline, where passengers will be able to access trains to Chicago and back.

He said he can't predict when anyone will see a "spade in the ground" for the start of construction, but the process will begin soon, he said.

"Over the last year, we've seen some ups and downs," Rumler said, referring to the state of Iowa backing out of its participation in the corridor. "But after our continued push for the Chicago to Quad-Cities connection, this has become a reality."

The state is adding \$45 million toward the rail project in the Illinois Jobs Now! capital program.

Regular passenger rail service hasn't been an option for the past 33 years in the Quad-Cities. Nearly five years ago, the Quad-City Passenger Rail Coalition was created to change that.

"This was a real grassroots campaign," Rumler said. "A wide swath of the community has come forward."

In a news release issued by IDOT, Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said expanding rail access into the Quad-Cities "makes economic sense."

The cooperative agreement includes sub-agreements on service outcome arrangements with the host railroads: Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railroad from Chicago to Wyanet, and Iowa Interstate Railroad from Wyanet to Moline. That agreement addresses how the corridor will be operated and provides for reliability standards, according to IDOT. Moline Mayor Don Welveart said in a news release that the announcement is a huge step and called the initiative the perfect example of how city, state and federal agencies can work together to make economic development projects happen.

The timing couldn't be better, as people are looking for shorter trips and more affordable ways to travel, Rumler said.

"Hopefully, this will provide an affordable way to attract a younger population to the Quad-Cities," Rumler said, talking about how college-age people could travel easily to Chicago and back.