



Local News

Fast trains on horizon

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NEW BUFFALO -
The snail's pace
of high-speed
railroad
development in
Michigan may
soon quicken.

The state expects
to learn this fall
whether it will
get \$834 million
in federal
economic
stimulus grant
money for
upgrades to
boost the speed
of Amtrak trains
traveling between
Detroit and
Chicago.

Funding would go
for "shovel-
ready" projects

on the line from Pontiac and Detroit to the Indiana line south of New Buffalo in an effort to create jobs.

Some of the funding would be for projects to allow trains to travel up to 79 mph. Other grants would be used to implement high-speed rail on the corridor, enabling speeds to 110 mph.

Nine grant applications submitted by Michigan seek money for track stabilization and acquisition, connecting track construction, train and traffic control systems, warning equipment, and station construction and improvements.

The state's effort is being coordinated with Indiana, Illinois and other Midwestern states. All states are competing for \$8 billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act money set aside this year to further development of the country's high-speed rail network.

The Obama administration has described the funding as a down payment, an important step in

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John Madill / H-P staff A high-speed Amtrak train zooms through downtown Three Oaks last week.

providing efficient intercity passenger service. Another \$1 billion will be requested annually for the next five years.

Tim Hoeffner, administrator of high-speed rail for the Michigan Department of Transportation, likes the state's chances of getting grant money, despite stiff competition.

States have applied for a total of \$100 billion in grants, more than 12 times the available money. The Federal Railroad Administration is evaluating the applications and is to announce the awards later this year.

Michigan is well positioned to get funding, Hoeffner said, because development of high-speed rail from Chicago to Detroit began in 1996. A lot of work has been done, particularly between Kalamazoo and the state line.

Trains on Amtrak's Wolverine route, which stop in Niles and Dowagiac, and soon New Buffalo, already travel at speeds up to 95 mph. FRA approval is being sought for an increase to 110 mph.

The immediate goal of the project is job creation, Hoeffner said.

But in the long term, completing the state's first high-speed rail line would be a powerful economic development tool, allowing a gradual increase of daily round trips on the Wolverine from the current three to 10.

"When you get that level of frequency, then people can take and use the train to get to their destination when they want to," he said.

The trip between Chicago and Detroit now takes about six hours each way. Upgrading to high-speed service would cut it to four hours, less time than it takes to drive.

"Whenever you get that volume of trains there's an awful lot of activity at the stations. That opens the opportunity for coffee shops, restaurants, dry cleaners, a cascade of economic development," Hoeffner said.

Future growth

For years officials in Southwest Michigan have recognized the opportunities offered to communities that would be touched by high-speed rail.

"We have always said this would be a bond to Niles and other communities," said Niles City Administrator Terry Eull. "It makes it more feasible to commute to other areas."

The city's tie to railroads goes back more than 150 years. The historic Amtrak rail station on Dey Street, built by the Michigan Central Railroad in 1892, is on the National Register of Historic Places and has been used in movies.

The Wolverine line's name was originally used by the Michigan Central, which built a track across southern Berrien County in the 1840s. The same right-of-way is used by Amtrak today.

Eull said the interest in upgrading passenger rail service has been around for years, but with little or no money available, things moved slowly.

"If you're going to have public transportation it is not going to be self-sustaining," he said. "A lot of people like the idea, but it's been about money. They've taken baby steps in the meantime."

New Buffalo will soon be a stop on the Wolverine line, switching over from Amtrak's Chicago-to-Grand Rapids Pere Marquette line. The Pere Marquette's future is in question because its annual operating subsidy from the state may be reduced or eliminated.

A downtown passenger station in New Buffalo is being completed, a project initiated several years ago by a developer.

New Buffalo City Manager Charles Dobbins said the initial schedule of stops in New Buffalo will not

be conducive to commuting.

But that could change if high-speed rail service adds trains, boosting the already sizeable number of residents who use the train to commute to Chicago.

"It can only help our economic vitality," Dobbins said.

Dan Fette, community development director for Berrien County, said the Wolverine line upgrade is part of the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative, a nine-state plan developed over the past 13 years to build a high-speed rail network using Chicago as a hub.

The greatest impediment to pushing up the speed of trains on the Chicago-Detroit corridor, he said, is the "tangle" of heavy rail traffic on restrictive freight line tracks from Porter, Ind., into Chicago.

The task of correcting those problems is being taken up by Indiana and Illinois.

Interest in intercity passenger rail service is growing as a result of higher fuel costs and the loss of air passenger service at many smaller airports, Fette said.

With a lot of federal funding available, high-speed rail could be operating between many cities within a few years, Fette said, and spokes could eventually be added to other places to expand the system.

Fette said such service on the Wolverine line could eventually increase the number of people who live in Berrien County and commute to Chicago.

A 2006 study conducted for the county, "Reaching Out," looked at the economic and population impact of linking Berrien to Chicago by fast commuter train.

At that time, 593 people made the daily trek by car or using the limited available train service, according to the study.

The study concluded that a fast train connection to Chicago could bring in hundreds of new residents, stabilizing the population and pumping money into the economy.

Fette said about 500,000 people commute daily into Chicago from outlying areas, mostly from suburban areas in Illinois and Indiana. Travel times for those commuters would be about the same or possibly less to Berrien County if high-speed rail were available.

The county's affordable real estate, schools, Lake Michigan and other attractions could draw commuters freed of a difficult drive.

Fette said a strong indicator is that a developer, not local or state government or Amtrak, initiated construction of the train station in New Buffalo.

The station and high-speed rail "give a new base of customers" to residential builders and developers, he said.

Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari said the federal government's pending infusion of cash should greatly speed up the process of upgrading intercity passenger service.

"The stars are really aligning for some real progress," he said.

In the Chicago area, a planning organization is working to ease the access conflicts among commuter, passenger and freight trains to improve reliability of rail travel and lower travel times.

As an example of the congestion, Magliari said the 14 Amtrak trains that travel between Michigan and Chicago each day go through Porter, Ind., on the same track, which is owned by a freight railroad.

With the current number of Amtrak trains, he said, people can't always get tickets for the time they want and have to change travel plans.

MDOT's Hoeffner said the 40-mile stretch from Porter to Chicago is one of the most congested rail traffic areas in the country, with more than 100 trains passing through daily.

"Getting through that area consistently on a schedule is the big issue," he said.

Amtrak owns the tracks used for its Wolverine line from Kalamazoo to the state line. The rest of the route uses freight tracks.

"At Porter, we need to add capacity," Hoeffner said.

Shortchanged on money

Although intercity rail travel can play an important role in meeting transportation needs, the country has historically failed to make the needed investment, according to a 2009 report written by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Passenger rail travel all but died in the 1960s when people switched to driving on the new interstate highway system and to air travel.

Congress created Amtrak in 1970 after privately owned rail companies got out of the passenger business. But the capital investment has been inadequate to keep up tracks and equipment and to invest in route improvements.

Over the years some members of Congress have tried to cut or eliminate the federal subsidy to Amtrak on grounds that the rail service ought to sink or swim on its own.

But the federal subsidy for Amtrak, which is formally called the National Railroad Passenger Corp., is a small fraction of the government's subsidies for air travel and highways.

The Amtrak subsidy was \$1.2 billion in 2005, compared with a federal investment of about \$18 billion for air and more than \$55 billion for highways, according to USDOT.

Also, each dollar a state spends for highways will bring in \$4 in federal funds. No such match is allowed for state expenditures on railroads.

The country lags other industrialized nations in high-speed rail. Japan has 1,360 miles in its system and annual ridership totals 300 million, the USDOT report said, while in France,, with 1,180 route miles, 100 million people ride each year. Germany's system has 798 miles of rail and ridership is 67 million annually.

The United States has 457 miles of high-speed rail track with ridership of 11 million a year, behind even China, with 588 miles in its system.

The trains on the European and Asian systems travel at speeds approaching 200 mph, compared to top operating speeds of 125-150 mph in the U.S.

The current grant program is being put forward by the Obama administration as part of a long-term strategy to develop a network of high-speed rail for trips of 100 to 600 miles between cities.

Rail buzz

Public interest in high-speed rail has been on the rise, possibly a result of the jolt of last year's \$4-a-gallon gas, according to the Southwest Michigan Regional Planning Commission.

Upgraded rail service "is always in the back of our minds," said Nickolas Musson, associate planner for the organization, which is developing a page in its Web site on rail developments.

Musson said regional planners are working with local officials to try to save the Pere Marquette line, which stops in St. Joseph and Bangor, and for its inclusion in the high-speed rail system.

John Egelhaaf, executive director of the planning commission, said high-speed rail will be operating

in the area within five years, and it will have an impact on growth.

Southwest Michigan has long had strong ties to Chicago, he said, and shortening travel times will strengthen those connections.

In Niles, a developer "made it very clear to me" that plans for a large-scale project grew directly from the promise of high-speed rail service.

The record gas prices of 2008, along with congestion and pollution concerns, bring home the limits of highway travel, though it will remain an important part of the transportation system, Egelhaaf said.

The idea of efficient rail travel has growing appeal at a time when people want "walkable" cities, trail networks and to leave a smaller footprint on the environment.

"It seems that sensibility is seeping into the populace," he said.

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