

Passenger Line to Chicago Closer to Reality

Feds, state give OK for further study

Rosa Salter Rodriguez | The Journal Gazette

Fort Wayne: The train stops here.

And also in Warsaw, Plymouth, Valparaiso and Gary on the way to Chicago and in Ohio's Lima, Kenton and Marysville on the way to Columbus and its international airport.

That vision, in the works for about two decades, may be a step closer to reality with an announcement Monday that federal rail and state transportation officials have given the go-ahead to a process that could restore passenger rail service to Fort Wayne.

The last passenger trains to serve the city ended in 1990.

"They are basically stating this is a good proposal that merits further study and analysis," said Fort Wayne City Councilman Geoff Paddock, D-5th, a longtime rail advocate, before a news conference announcing the development at Baker Street Station, which could again be a stop for passenger trains if the plan succeeds.

Technically known as an Alternatives Analysis and Public Involvement Process and required by the federal government, the preliminary work examining restarting service is to begin in January and end by fall, Paddock said.

The work will include a rough assessment of the engineering and technical aspects of restarting regular passenger trips between Chicago and Columbus, as well as what form that service might take and its environmental impacts, Paddock said.

Public input meetings will be part of the process, which is being paid for with \$350,000 raised the last three years from municipalities along the route as well as businesses, educational institutions and community foundations.

Serving Monday as spokesman for the Northern Indiana Passenger Rail Association, which has pushed the plan, Paddock said the proposed passenger service to Chicago would not replace Amtrak service that already stops in Waterloo but does not extend to Fort Wayne.

Instead, the new service would schedule passenger trains on existing CSX tracks now used for freight, he said. That would likely require modifications such as signaling and track improvements, he said. The new service would also likely use some existing stations.

The projected start date of at least limited service would be "2020, or the early 2020s," Paddock said.

But the dream is much bigger, speakers at the news conference said.

Ultimately, the service could link 100 Midwest cities with comfortable, dependable train service through a network of rail lines now being envisioned at the federal level – something that proponents touted as boosting regional economic development and opening the region’s residents to more accessible opportunities for international air travel.

Mayor Tom Henry said a passenger rail would bring jobs to the city. Work would be created for people to serve travelers, and being able to travel easily to Chicago from Fort Wayne might induce companies who need easy access to that city to locate here, he said.

“Also, we’re trying to make Fort Wayne a destination,” Henry said, citing recent investments in riverfront development and park improvements.

“Unquestionably, rail service would add to tourism in our city.”

Lima Mayor David Berger pointed out that students throughout the corridor could access educational travel, including study abroad if they live only a few miles from a stop for a train that could get them to multiple international airports.

Rail service from Chicago also would help representatives of overseas businesses to access the Fort Wayne area if they wanted to locate a business, said Richard Harnish, executive director of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association.

“Imagine you’re an executive from Frankfurt, Germany, and you can fly to Chicago and get a train to Fort Wayne,” he said.

Paddock said early indications are that the service could serve as many as 2 million people annually and be self-sustaining in three to five years, generating \$1.70 for every dollar in investment.

He acknowledged it’s too early to know how the project would be funded.

However, Paddock is hopeful because the need to change existing tracks has been minimized by lowering the projected speed of trains from 110 to between 75 and 80 miles per hour. Also, he said, new interest in infrastructure improvements has been expressed by President-elect Donald Trump, who has promised an infrastructure bill in his first 100 days in office.

Improvements to the Hoosier State line, which runs passenger trains from Chicago to Indianapolis, are succeeding, with funding from a state tax-amnesty program. Paddock said he is hopeful Gov.-elect Eric Holcomb will continue that program.

“The return of passenger rail to Fort Wayne will be a huge boost for economic development in Fort Wayne and northeast Indiana,” Paddock said. It is gratifying that the (Federal Railroad Administration) and (Indiana Department of Transportation) see there is an untapped market for rail service in Fort Wayne.”

rsalter@jg.net