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## Buttigieg pick fuels fast-train backers

Hopes raised for return of passenger rail service

DAVE GONG | The Journal Gazette

With the nomination of former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg as President-elect Joe Biden's secretary of transportation, passenger rail advocates hope the incoming federal administration will look favorably upon a northern Indiana proposal years in the making.

Last week, Fort Wayne City Councilman Geoff Paddock, a board member of the Northern Indiana Passenger Rail Association, sent a letter to Buttigieg asking for his support to construct a passenger rail connection between Chicago and Columbus, Ohio, with a stop in Fort Wayne.

"I have personally promoted this for 20 years," Paddock's Dec. 30 letter said. "Columbus is the largest city in the Midwest without passenger rail service and Fort Wayne is the largest in Indiana without it, losing our rail service in 1990."

In an interview Monday, Paddock said he hopes Biden – who often used Amtrak to travel between Washington, D.C., and Wilmington, Delaware – and Buttigieg will favor the proposal and help “to move things forward.”

“We’re trying to get our proposal out there and in the hands of the proper people,” Paddock said, adding there is a bipartisan effort in the Indiana General Assembly to create a statewide passenger rail commission.

The Northern Indiana Passenger Rail Association has nearly completed its Tier 1 environmental assessment, a requirement to move the proposal forward, Paddock said.

The proposal also has support from all of the mayors of cities and towns that fall along the route.

An overall cost for the proposal has yet to be determined, but Paddock said building and maintaining the rail line would likely cost less than building a new highway.

“This is a key corridor between Chicago and Columbus, with the next corridor being Columbus to Pittsburgh,” Paddock said. “It’s a key connection here that we’ve been trying to push. It’s been a bipartisan effort, and it’s been accepted across state lines.

“The support is booming.”

[dgong@jg.net](mailto:dgong@jg.net)