

Amtrak—The little engine that (barely) could

By Jim Nowlan

I take Amtrak from Kewanee to Chicago just about every week. The two-hour ride is generally reliable and comfortable. At \$30-40 roundtrip, the price is better than driving, and I end up in the center of a great city, able to walk to many of my destinations. I have watched the trains fill up over the past few years, as ridership has risen sharply since 2006, when gas prices spiked and Amtrak also increased the frequency of service on its Illinois lines.

What is the future of this passenger rail service and what will it mean for central Illinois?

“We have turned the corner on whether there will be an Amtrak in the future,” declares Marc Magliari, media relations manager in Chicago for Amtrak. “We have bipartisan support in Congress and had support from President Bush.”

This confidence has not always been justified. Amtrak began service almost 40 years ago. The Nixon Administration cynically expected the experiment to last only a couple of years, a “last hurrah” for rail passenger service in the era of Interstates and jet planes. But once started, government programs take on a life of their own, and Amtrak stayed alive, lurching from one fiscal crisis to another.

Throughout, Amtrak has been treated by Congress as a step-child, given enough to stay alive but not enough to prosper. Until an order for 130 rail cars was placed this

year, Amtrak hasn't had any new equipment since the 1990s, and some cars used daily date back as far as 1947.

The United States will never have comprehensive, fast rail passenger service along the lines of Europe, Japan and China, because most Amtrak lines run on rails owned by the freight railroads. The railroads handle the dispatching of trains and, we riders think, give preference to the freight traffic, often causing frustrating delays on Amtrak.

In addition to annual federal support of about \$1.1 billion a year, states such as Illinois provide subsidies to support in-state trains such as the one I generally take. Illinois provides \$28 million a year from the state transportation department to support about 1 million in-state passengers. Readers can do the math to get a sense of the size of the subsidy per passenger. Train buffs make the point that all forms of transportation are subsidized by government.

The Obama and Quinn administrations have been boosters of Amtrak, and of high-speed rail. Work has begun south of Springfield to turn the Chicago-St. Louis route into a 110 mile per hour corridor, not really high speed but much faster than the present service.

There is also money available from the state to expand service to the Quad-Cities and into Iowa as well as to run a line to Rockford and Galena. The old Quad-Cities Rocket ended service in 1978, but by 2012-2013 Magliari sees twice-a-day service once again between the Quad Cities and Chicago.

Work is also planned that will make service faster between Chicago and Kankakee and points farther south. At present, trains from Kankakee must back into and

out of Union Station in Chicago, which is time-consuming and frustrating for riders in a hurry to be on their way. Magliari hopes that by 2014-2015 trains on the Kankakee line will be able to shoot directly in and out of Union Station.

Amtrak also recently announced a \$41 million expansion of passenger seating in waiting rooms at Union Station and the addition of more restrooms, both badly needed.

The Boston-Washington, D.C. corridor is the most popular of Amtrak routes. Trains can run up to 150-mph in places and Amtrak owns much of the right-of-way. Travel on the Illinois routes is limited to 79-mph by federal rules but that limit could be lifted in years to come, as more rail lines are being required to install “positive train control” technology, which backs up the engineer and reduces errors.

So, what we have is passenger rail that is providing so-so service that will never become truly first class by European standards, yet is often better than the automobile.

The big challenge for Amtrak is that it is subject to annual appropriations by both the federal and state governments. Will a conservative tide sweep into power and see Amtrak as a place to cut spending? Or will the governments continue to provide limited nurture to the Amtrak system? I predict that Amtrak will continue with enough funding to provide service of about the same level as we have today, maybe a bit improved. But don't expect bullet trains.