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Amtrak to go through Genoa

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GENOA – State officials have announced that the Amtrak line connecting Dubuque to Chicago will stop in Genoa.

The Illinois Department of Transportation announced the selection of the proposed southern route, which includes the Genoa stop, for Amtrak's new Chicago-Rockford-Dubuque service from Chicago's Union Station to downtown Rockford. The \$60 million service will create 650 construction jobs, with trains running by early 2014, according to a news release from IDOT. The Chicago-Rockford-Dubuque line marks the return of passenger rail to the Rockford area for the first time since 1981.

"Obviously, we're very, very pleased," Joe Misurelli, city administrator for Genoa, said of the decision. "It's going to vastly increase the population served."

Misurelli said Gov. Pat Quinn's office and IDOT made a decision that would serve the highest population possible, and that that Amtrak now has a better chance of being sustainable in the long-run.

"It was the best decision for the taxpayers," he said.

The announcement puts to rest a debate that has lasted most of the year between Genoa and Belvidere as to where the route would go.

For years, the route options to restart passenger rail service between Chicago and Dubuque have been weighed, and IDOT chose the Canadian National line, which runs through Genoa, in its application to the federal government for stimulus funds.

The project was not picked for federal funding, so Gov. Pat Quinn appropriated \$60 million from the state's capital budget for it. But because the funding source changed, both route options were put back on the table.

In March, Quinn announced the route would go through Belvidere on a Union Pacific route. A few

days later, IDOT officials confirmed to the Daily Chronicle that the Chicago-to-Dubuque service would stop in Belvidere – noting that the route was decided by Quinn and not transportation officials.

But in August, an IDOT spokesman said that data was still being compiled about the project in order to be eligible for federal funds in the future.

Quinn's office did not return calls for comment Friday, but in the news release issued by IDOT, he said that "Illinois is committed to creating jobs and promoting economic development by linking our cities, businesses and universities through passenger rail. The selection of the southern route does the best job of accomplishing those goals safely and cost effectively."

The selection of routes was based on an independent study by the Decatur office of engineering firm URS Corp., according to the news release. The analysis showed that the southern route through Genoa will require a \$26.2 million investment in upgraded infrastructure between Chicago and Rockford. Similar improvements on the proposed northern route through Belvidere would cost \$62.3 million, raising the total cost of the route to more than \$96 million.

The study also determined an estimated annual ridership of 76,357 on the southern route compared to 54,988 on the northern route.

Safety was another deciding factor in the study. The southern route will cross 143 roads and highways. The northern route would cross 176. The southern route also will see fewer delays using only two railroads, while the northern route would require using four railroads, according to the news release.

"The southern route offers the best deal for travelers and taxpayers," Illinois Transportation Secretary Gary Hannig said in the news release. "After much deliberation, we are excited to start service to an underserved part of the state."

Despite the earlier statements about the route going through Belvidere, those behind the effort to bring the Amtrak to DeKalb County remained optimistic.

Bonnie Hanson, director of the Genoa Chamber of Commerce, said when the organization learned the route was to go through Belvidere, a petition campaign resulted in 1,000 signatures in less than two weeks in support of the Genoa route.

"This is a happy day for us," she said. "We couldn't be more thrilled, and we're ready to take a ride on Amtrak."

Other DeKalb County leaders said Illinois officials made a responsible decision with taxpayer money.

"An Amtrak service is going to support and reinforce development in Genoa and DeKalb County," said Paul Borek, executive director of the DeKalb County Economic Development Corp. "Genoa could certainly attract additional business activity as a result of the new rail station."

State Sen. Brad Burzynski, R-Rochelle, supported the route with the Belvidere stop. He said he was a little disappointed by Friday's announcement, but is confident the state chose the best route. Both Belvidere and Genoa are in his legislative district.

"It was going to disenfranchise folks no matter which community it went to," he said. "We'll move forward and make sure it's a feasible route and that it has good ridership."

State Rep. Robert Pritchard, R-Hinckley, said that Quinn may have misspoken in March when he said the route would go through Belvidere.

"What I think is really important here is that the governor tried to be fair," Pritchard said. "When you have two studies that come out with the same recommendation, a fair-minded person is going to follow that recommendation."

State Rep. Robert Pritchard, R-Hinckley, said he was delighted at the news. Although Genoa is not in his legislative district, Pritchard has said he takes seriously issues affecting any DeKalb County resident or municipality.

"I am just delighted that the local folks and the county economic development corporation that worked so hard on this had their work vindicated," Pritchard said.

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"What I think is really important here is that the governor tries to be fair," Pritchard said. "When you have two studies that come out with the same recommendation, a fair-minded person is going to follow that recommendation."

Belvidere Mayor Fred Brereton and state Rep. Ron Wait, R-Belvidere, could not be reached for comment Friday. Belvidere and Genoa are in Wait's legislative district. The Belvidere Area Chamber of Commerce declined to comment, and a message left with the Growth Dimensions Economic Development for Belvidere was not returned Friday.