



Study: Iowa Interstate best route for cross Iowa passenger service

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DES MOINES, Iowa – Preliminary findings of a study examining routes for potential new Chicago-Omaha passenger service have determined Iowa Interstate’s ex-Rock Island route across the state is best suited for the new service.

The study examined all the existing freight railroads currently crossing the state, and one that was largely abandoned 30 years ago, before deciding the best course is to build on a revived Chicago-Moline route that Illinois is developing for a planned launch in late 2014. Backers hope that service would be extended to Iowa City, but Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad and legislative Republicans are unwilling to appropriate the \$3 million annual operating cost.

“That is a route that is able to deliver passenger rail service that meets the purpose and need,” said Mark Hemphill, director of rail consulting services for HDR Engineering of Omaha, which is conducting the study. “Most of all it’s a competitive rail service that’s attractive to travelers.” Hemphill, former editor of *Trains* magazine, said the Union Pacific’s route was rejected because Cedar Rapids is the only population center on the line. It’s also doubtful Union Pacific would welcome passenger trains on the line, which sees upward of 60 freight trains daily.

Now that a preferred route has been identified, it will be the subject of a detailed environmental study over the next year. The Iowa Department of Transportation and the federal government are splitting the study’s \$2 million cost.

Jerome Lipka, president and CEO of Cedar Rapids-based Iowa Interstate, said the railroad would consider hosting the new service if it doesn’t interfere with freight traffic.

“As long as there’s no impact on our freight service and as long as there is total cost neutrality to us, basically we would be in support of it,” Lipka said. “We’ve got to be concerned about our business, and we’ve got to be concerned about our ability to survive and to grow.”

Illinois plans to begin work this summer to restore Chicago-Moline, Ill., service with two Amtrak trains daily in each direction. A connection will be built at Wyanet, Ill., 116 miles west of Chicago, allowing passenger trains to shift from Iowa Interstate to BNSF Railway to reach Chicago Union Station.

Amtrak’s *California Zephyr* presently links Chicago and Omaha operating over BNSF with stops in Iowa at Burlington, Mt. Pleasant, Osceola, and Creston. Passenger service to Des Moines via the Rock Island route now operated by Iowa Interstate ended in 1970.