

Elgin, Huntley, Rockford to get Amtrak service

By Dave Gathman dgathman@stmedianetwork.com April 10, 2014

ELGIN — For the first time in more than 40 years, Elgin will have passenger rail service other than commuter trains to Chicago. And for the first time in many decades, people will be able to board a train in Huntley and ride it to either Chicago or Rockford.

In a surprise move, Gov. Pat Quinn announced Thursday that the much-debated Amtrak service he has long wanted to set up from Chicago to Rockford and Dubuque, Iowa will run through Elgin, Huntley and Belvidere.

The governor said trains will start running in the Chicago-Elgin-Huntley-Belvidere-Rockford portion sometime next year.

Illinois Department of Transportation officials said an Amtrak station will be set up in Huntley using state money and that Elgin's Chicago Street Metra station will be used to process Amtrak passengers in Elgin. Quinn said service will begin next year with one roundtrip train each day, to be expanded to two trains a day in 2016.

The trains will follow the existing two-track Metra Milwaukee District line from Chicago to Elgin. They will switch over to the Union Pacific Railroad's one-track "Belvidere



Subsidiary" — the track known to old-time Elgnites as "the high North Western line" — via a new connection to be built between Metra's tracks and the Union Pacific track somewhere in the area of Metra's Big Timber station.

The trains then will follow the Union Pacific line through Gilberts, Huntley and Belvidere to a new station to be set up in Rockford. The governor said arrangements still are pending to continue the service from Rockford to Freeport, Galena and Dubuque.

Surprise twist

The announcement apparently is the last surprise twist in a long political battle over which route a Chicago-Rockford Amtrak service should take.

The argument began eight years ago. The battle pitched village and city officials from Huntley and Belvidere against those from Genoa and those from Hampshire and Pingree Grove.

Three routes were being considered: the Metra/Union Pacific one that now seems to have won; a route along the Canadian National Railway line (the former Illinois Central "prairie line") that would have included a stop along Randall Road in South Elgin and a stop in Genoa; and a combination of the Metra West line with a Canadian Pacific (formerly Milwaukee Road) freight line that might have included a stop in Hampshire. That last route also would have passed through Pingree Grove.

The city officials were particularly interested in bending the service their way because Amtrak's stations and infrastructure would make it more likely that some day Metra might extend commuter train service from Chicago along the same line. Using the Union Pacific route opens the door to possible Metra service from Chicago to Gilberts and Huntley. The decision makes it less likely that Hampshire, Pingree Grove, Genoa and South Elgin will see Metra service any time soon.

A study by Amtrak in 2007 concluded that the South Elgin-Genoa route would be cheapest to start up, would draw the most riders and would be cheapest to operate. That report noted that the Union Pacific route which now has been chosen is used mainly only for shipping new autos out of the Chrysler assembly plant in Belvidere, that the line has no electric signals and few sidings, and that parts of it between Belvidere and Rockford were in such terrible condition that trains could travel along it at no more than 10 mph.

Third change

This is the third time the Amtrak route has been changed. In 2009 the Illinois Department of Transportation applied for federal funds to start the service, using the South Elgin-Genoa route. But the federal aid was denied. A few months later Quinn announced during a visit to Rockford that money from the state's Illinois Jobs Now infrastructure-building

program had been set aside to start up the service, and that it would run via the Elgin-Huntley-Belvidere route. But then in December 2010 IDOT announced that the South Elgin-Genoa route would be used after all.

In announcing the new move Thursday, IDOT officials implied they had switched back to the Elgin-Huntley-Belvidere route because of difficulty reaching an agreement with Canadian National.

"The new northern route was selected following lengthy negotiations with the Canadian National Railway, whose tracks were originally chosen for the service," a press release from IDOT said. "Switching to the new tracks will ensure that service begins in 2015 and isn't held up by continued delays."

Quinn said \$223 million in track, signaling and safety improvements will be funded primarily through the Illinois Jobs Now program.

According to the IDOT press release, Elgin Mayor David Kaptain said that "it is essential for the economic development and the ultimate financial well being of all communities to have quality transportation. I thank Gov. Quinn and the state of Illinois for providing our region with improvements to I-90, high-speed rail and bus rapid transit between Elgin and Rockford that will bring us all

unprecedented opportunities for growth."

IDOT officials said preliminary improvements to the Union Pacific track will accommodate Amtrak trains at 59 mph by the end of next year. They said final improvements will be completed in 2016, at which point speeds will increase to 79 mph and a second Chicago-Rockford round trip will be added.

"The state will continue to work with the Canadian National Railroad to extend this corridor to its ultimate destination of Dubuque, Iowa, stopping in Freeport and Galena," the IDOT statement said.

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