

News conference for the release of the Amtrak feasibility study of passenger rail service from the Quad Cities to Iowa City (4/18/08)

Speech by Jim Larew, Policy Director and Chief Counsel, Office of Governor Chet Culver

Greetings from Governor Chet Culver and Lt. Gov Patty Judge.

As you know, we are in the closing days of the general assembly. All hands are on deck sorting through the budget, seeking compromises with legislators that will assure fiscally responsible government while implementing progressive policies that will meet the needs of our citizens.

The Governor and Lt. Governor see a more sustainable, more efficient energy future as the key to maintaining a high quality of economic and environmental life for all Iowans--including, importantly, in our transportation sector.

The most important ingredient to any future success, however, is that our citizens--who must provide heat and light if we are to move forward with this vital project—extending a new passenger rail network to the central part of our state.

Today's event is remindful of another one, in this same city, a little over 150 years ago.

The leaders of this area determined that railroads were the key to the economic and social future.

In 1853, they entered into an agreement with owners of a Chicago-based railroad, the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad Company, to complete a new line from Davenport to Iowa City by January 1, 1856.

Work began at once. But it was not easy--these things never are.

Track was laid, as rapidly as possible, starting in Davenport, going westerly.

In the summer of 1855, the first locomotive for the new road was ferried across the Mississippi River, for the bridge across the river had not yet been completed.

The expectation was great--that the railroad would arrive at its destination on time.

Visitors from across the state and from Chicago, Davenport, Wilton were invited to attend the anticipated New Year's day celebration.

But something happened.

The coldness of winter set in. Progress slowed.

To make certain that the rail would reach Iowa City on-time, citizens left their homes and hearths in 20-degree-below-0 weather, with their shovels, saws and pick-axes.

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They joined the work crews.

They laid the ties and rails; they drove the spikes.

They cut timber to create enormous bonfires to provide heat and light, as the community members and the railroad work crews worked through the nights.

In the early morning hours of January 1, 1856, cannons in Iowa City announced the arrival of the track, and the citizens, and the trailing locomotive--on time, as promised.

The feasting celebrations that followed were held a block away---in Old Capitol, one of the great events in the history of our city.

Now, today, the success of this project--bringing passenger rail service back to Iowa City once again--is dependent on you, the citizens.

Let us all become torch-bearers, lighters of political bonfires.

Let us all pitch-in; let us all do our part.

Let our light assure that the project does not lose its way.

Keep your powder dry.

Ready your cannons.

I believe that one of our region's next great celebrations--with your help--is going to occur, on time, and as scheduled.