

**TESTIMONY FOR THE
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON RAILROADS, PIPELINES, AND HAZARDOUS
MATERIALS
JUNE 26, 2007
ILLINOIS STATE REPRESENTATIVE ELAINE NEKRITZ**

Chairwoman Brown, members of the Rail Subcommittee of the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, I am Illinois State Representative Elaine Nekritz. In my role as the Chair of the newly created Illinois House Rail Committee and as a Commissioner from Illinois to the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission, I am honored to share with you Illinois' exciting news about passenger rail, as well as a little bit about the challenges we face, and our vision for the future of passenger rail, both in Illinois and throughout the Midwest region.

Illinois' Investment in Passenger Rail

For many years, the State of Illinois has made an investment in passenger rail by purchasing Amtrak service along four corridors. The schedule, however, was inconvenient and did not necessarily allow for easy round trip travel between Chicago and downstate communities. Despite these difficulties, Illinois saw a 40% increase in ridership between 2003 and 2006.

Responding to this demand, Governor Blagojevich and the Illinois General Assembly committed an additional \$12 million, for a total of \$24 million, to state sponsored Amtrak service last year. Starting on October 30, 2006, we purchased one additional daily round trip on both the Chicago to Carbondale and Chicago to Quincy corridors and two additional round trips on the federally designated high speed rail corridor between Chicago and St. Louis.

When the new service was announced, it was widely applauded by the media, local elected officials and citizens all across the state. But no one could have anticipated the response from riders. In the first six months of the service, ridership is up dramatically – from 60% on the Chicago/Quincy line to over 100% on the Chicago/St. Louis line.

And these numbers continue month after month despite problems with on time performance and equipment break downs.

These results clearly demonstrate the significant pent up demand for passenger rail service in Illinois and the Midwest.

Obstacles to Providing New Passenger Rail Service

Providing this new service is only the beginning for Illinois. In order to continue the service, and to have any chance at building on our success, we must overcome some hurdles.

The first is the lack of trainsets. With the new service, Illinois has used up all of Amtrak's remaining inventory of locomotives and cars. Thus, when there are breakdowns, we experience delays. When trains are sold out – which happens more often than we could have anticipated – there are no cars to add to accommodate additional passengers. And we clearly cannot provide any new service until this problem is resolved.

Our second hurdle is the infrastructure on the host rail lines – both the quality of maintenance and conflicts with freight traffic. The Union Pacific line between Chicago and Springfield has nearly 20 slow orders that require Amtrak to run at reduced speeds, sometimes no more than 10 miles per hour. The conditions and lack of adequate sidings on all the lines prevents passenger and freight trains from passing each other in an orderly fashion. All these issues add to delays and impact on time performance.

Third, while Illinois has upgraded a portion of track on the Chicago/St. Louis line to accommodate trains at 110 mph, more needs to be done to make passenger rail run fast enough to truly be a viable alternative for both business and leisure travel.

Fourth, we need to expand beyond existing routes and connect to cities such as Rockford, the Quad Cities, Decatur, Peoria and Galena. The Mayors of these communities have already expressed strong interest in pursuing new train service and the Illinois Department of Transportation is actively engaged in studies to determine the viability of such service.

Federal Investment in Passenger Rail

To be truly successful, the State of Illinois needs partners. We already have a partner in Amtrak and the freight railroads. We are hopeful that the federal government will also join us as a partner.

I applaud Congress for continuing to provide funding for Amtrak. This year, Amtrak has requested \$1.55 billion for operations and the Senate has proposed \$1.78 billion. I would encourage the House to join the Senate in supporting Amtrak at the higher level.

In addition to reauthorizing funding for Amtrak, a federal matching program similar to that provided for other modes of transportation would give states the boost they need to meet the demand for passenger rail service. An 80/20 match could provide the incentive for Illinois, for example, to purchase or lease additional trainsets, invest in the rail infrastructure, upgrade for higher speeds and meet the demand for service to additional cities.

Let me give you just one other example of how passenger rail could benefit from a matching program. Freight traffic in the Chicago region is predicted to increase by 60 to 70% by 2020. While the freight railroads are making capital investments that will allow them to carry additional traffic, that investment does not necessarily benefit passenger rail. Those dollars must come from the public sector but Illinois alone cannot carry that burden.

A matching program would also put us much closer to realizing the vision of the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative to connect the entire Midwest region with high quality passenger rail. The benefits of such service will extend beyond enhanced travel options – as I am sure you will hear today.

Finally, federal support is critical for the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Project, otherwise known as CREATE. As you are well aware, CREATE was designated a “project of national significance” in the recent transportation reauthorization legislation, SAFETEA-LU. While CREATE is vital for improving the transport of freight across our nation, it also provides benefits to passenger rail. I am working with my colleagues in the General Assembly to include as much as \$500 million for CREATE in any capital program authorized by the State. But without support from the federal government, this project cannot provide the full benefits that are so desperately needed.

Again, thank you for this opportunity. The State of Illinois is committed to improving our passenger rail service and it can be even better for my state and the entire region with the involvement of the federal government.

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