

High-speed rail may link Midwest

With financial help from feds, states could build lines to connect Chicago, Indy and Cincinnati

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Kelly Allen is a senior regional manager for Duke Realty who drives to Cincinnati 15 to 20 times a year on business and would love to make the trip by train.

Allen, 29, an East Coast native, grew up riding trains to New York City and Washington. "I know it would be an absolute plus for any business or leisure traveler to get that kind of service here," Allen said. "You can get a lot of work done on the train. And you can wind down from your day on the way home."

Allen might someday get her wish. A bill pending in Congress would provide millions of dollars to Indiana and other states to improve high-speed train service. The Senate Commerce Committee unanimously approved the bill in April; it now heads to the Senate floor for debate, quite possibly by the end of July, prior to the summer recess.

President Bush also has proposed \$100 million for state rail grants in his budget for 2008. Included on the list of proposed routes that would benefit: a stretch running from Chicago to Indianapolis to Cincinnati.

It would mean quicker routes for Hoosier travelers seeking alternatives to driving or flying.

With trains operating at speeds up to 110 mph at various spots along the corridor, travel times on the proposed routes would be clipped in half from typical rail.

Total travel time between Chicago and Cincinnati would be about four hours, including stops in Indianapolis, Gary and Lafayette, according to the Indiana Department of Transportation.

"This could be a godsend to both the tourism industry and the business community," said Dennis Hodges, founder and executive director of the Indiana High Speed Rail Association. Hodges, Merrillville, has lobbied for 15 years to bring high-speed rail service to Indiana. "It would make Indiana and Midwest destinations more affordable and more accommodating."

According to the Midwest Regional Rail System, a cooperative effort involving Amtrak, the Federal Railroad Administration and nine states including Indiana, the investment could be lucrative in Indiana.

The organization's 2003 study shows that Cincinnati to Chicago by way of Indianapolis would be one of the more profitable of all high-speed rail lines in the country. "Among the top 10," said Alex Metcalf, president of Transportation Economics & Management Systems in Frederick, Md.

Each state is responsible for footing the bill for its own rails. With Indiana accountable for a 319-mile stretch in the route linking Chicago to Cincinnati, the state's participation is needed to link those cities.

Is Indiana ready? Yes. And no.

The infrastructure is here -- Indiana has more federally designated corridors for high-speed trains than any other state.

But the state has yet to do an environmental impact study. Without it, the funds will be on hold. Those Midwest Regional Rail System states that have already done the study -- such as Illinois and Wisconsin -- will be first in line for the resources, said Metcalf. Others will have to play catch-up.

"It's a money thing," said Andrew Dietrick, INDOT communications director. "It's an expensive and time-consuming proposition to do an entire environmental impact study for a corridor of that size."

A bill approved this year by the Indiana General Assembly, could aid the process. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Terri J. Austin, D-Anderson, asks the state to devote more time and resources to mass transit by establishing a joint study committee on mass transit and transportation alternatives.

INDOT estimates that corridor development through Indiana would cost slightly more than \$1 million per mile.

The bill also would give INDOT the authority to enter into an agreement with a private firm to construct and operate mass transit systems.

"The ability to involve a private entity may be the best and only way to make such a project economically feasible and provide this service to Hoosiers," said state Sen. Robert N. Jackman, R-Milroy, a longtime proponent of passenger rail service.

As far as actual demand for such service, Hodges admitted, "We don't know. "I guess you could call it the 'Field of Dreams' theory. If we build it, they will come."