

BRING BACK BLACKHAWK
Citizen's Committee Planning Meeting
Friday, January 26, 2018, 1:00 P.M.
E. J. "Zeke" Giorgi Center Conference Room
200 So. Wyman Street, Rockford

Meeting Summary

On Friday, January 26 some two dozen community leaders of northwest Illinois gathered to promote the restoration of passenger rail service from Chicago to Rockford, Galena, Dubuque and with points in between and further west. Participants included representatives of communities, county boards, state and federal legislatures along with interested local citizenry.

The initial presentation to the gathering was a power point presentation referencing the goals for passenger service including the number of trains, station stops, schedule, ridership and related topics. Four trains per day, including express and local trains each direction and ridership potential by train stops presented for review and discussion. The goal of extending to Waterloo/Cedar Falls stressed because of significant student enrollment at University of Northern Iowa. Conversation stressed citizen ridership including daily business, commuter, etc., to and from Chicago enhanced by tourism events and recreation, educational field trips, gaming patrons and airport access to Dubuque, Rockford and O'Hare. Rural economic development was stressed as a significant component of immense potential for the service. Populations along the route, potential for business and commercial development and student populations in several locales noted as significant, especially when compared with other state supported passenger routes.

Illinois 34th District State Senator Steve Stadelman commended re-establishing the route commenting that such is important as economic development follows transportation. The senator noted travel habits are changing, especially among millennials. Briefly reviewing the progress towards establishing the route in prior years, he assessed the outlook of the current state legislature and executive. However, he cited possible new opportunities with funding options being reviewed and interest at multiple levels in public/private partnerships. Stating the importance of establishing some form of a tri-county consortium of northwest Illinois counties, the equivalent of a Regional Transportation Agency or through a similar legal and contractual relationship, with potential revenue sharing entity to organize public support and supply substantial financial resources. With discussions at both the federal and state level, it is important that the voice of the local citizenry is heard. He commended the group for their activity and noted his advocacy in the state legislature for state supported passenger rail.

Speaking next, Rick Harnish, CEO of Midwest High Speed Rail in Chicago noted the importance of collective advocacy to take advantage of possible opportunity. Too often, Harnish stated, transportation issues are considered in a segmented process, using the example of Rockford to the west, Rockford to the Metra system border, then Metra to downtown Chicago. Important to look at the "big picture," bring an approach for a system-wide, unified approach, stressing connections to multiple areas, then suggest a plan with supporting documentation for implementation.

A third speaker was Jim Coston, Chairman of Corridor Capital, a Chicago-based passenger rail development, finance and management company. Coston reviewed several themes of the conversation, adding such advocacy is to make the cause important to decision-makers. Doubling service usually means more than two times the previous ridership, adding a second train does not detract from one train. At start-up there is often a need for private funding, rented equipment and special expertise in preparations with attention to priorities of frequency, reliability of schedule, assurance of investment capital as needed and capacity to operate a train. If and when a service is reinstated and done right, success is a natural progression as ridership grows.

Roger Schamberger of Lena next addressed rural economic development and spoke briefly of two factors in Lena. Initial focus was the 1873 Lena Depot Project of the local business and professional organization and cited other multiple community events, nearby recreational resources and area residents in northwest Illinois with Chicago connections at several junctures. Economic development offers vast potential as evidenced by the ethanol plant and its growth over the past few years and noted other business prospects as examples of such.

The presenters responded to questions and comment both during and following their presentations. In addition to the presenters, several participants emphasized the importance and necessity of strong marketing efforts to the success of any project, before and after implementation, as well as enlisting the support of various public and private entities along the route early in the process. The group anticipates further activity at several levels in building the case for re-establishing the route for benefit of all in business, personal and leisure travel including the expertise of organizations, business leaders, elected representatives and citizens.