

New State Supported Amtrak Service

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. -- Amtrak trains will be chugging across Illinois more often, thanks to a bigger state subsidy, and local officials said Monday (Sept. 25) they hope increased service translates into economic growth, according to this Associated Press report by Christopher Wills. State support for Amtrak is doubling to \$24 million this year. The money will support seven round-trip trains from Chicago to St. Louis, Carbondale and Quincy, up from three trains now.

For the cities along those routes, more trains mean more connection to Chicago -- something that can help local businesses and even attract new ones.

"We would definitely use that as a marketing tool to demonstrate a little more accessibility and convenience, both for the businesses and their customers," said Charles Bell, manager of the entrepreneurship center at Quincy's Great River Economic Development Foundation.

The current Amtrak schedule is terribly inconvenient for Quincy travelers, he said. The most practical arrangement is to go up one day, attend meetings the next and come home on a third day. But the new service should make

shorter trips more feasible, Bell said.

Jeff Doherty, the city manager in Carbondale, said travelers there no longer will have to choose between leaving for Chicago at 3 a.m. or at 4 p.m. Now there will be a much more useful 7:30 a.m. option.

Businesses will take advantage of the new train, he said, but it's most important for college students.

Southern Illinois University attracts many students from the Chicago area. Easier travel to and from Chicago will keep them coming to Carbondale and keep the university healthy, Doherty said.

In fact, the added Carbondale train will be named the Saluki in honor of the SIU mascot. Names for the new trains to St. Louis and Quincy have not been announced yet.

The new service is to begin Oct. 30.

St. Louis will have three state-supported trains to and from Chicago, up from one now. Carbondale and Quincy each will have two, instead of one. In addition, Amtrak has other trains passing through those cities that don't get any state support.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich noted that demand for the rail service is increasing.

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Nearly 1 million passengers used Amtrak lines subsidized by the state last year, setting a new record. The total was up 12.5 percent from a year earlier and 40.8 percent from 2003.

"Amtrak is an affordable travel option, and in many communities it's the only form of public transportation," Blagojevich said in a statement.

(The preceding Associated Press report by Christopher Wills was published by the Chicago Tribune on Monday, Sept. 25, 2006.)