



I think I can, I think I can!

By: Deborah D. Thornton

The beloved children's story, "The Little Engine that Could," is a tale of perseverance and spunk, used to teach children that if they keep trying, they will eventually succeed. Unfortunately, sometimes we don't.

The federal government recently awarded initial funding to Illinois and Iowa for the development of passenger rail service between Iowa City and Chicago. Following this announcement internet comment boards have been filled with ardent opinions from those both for and against. The federal government is trillions of dollars in debt and many states, including Iowa and Illinois, are fighting to balance their budgets. According to the Illinois Comptroller, Illinois has a \$15 billion deficit, while the Iowa budget is barely balanced. Accordingly, it is appropriate to ask if this is a wise use of taxpayer dollars. The initial appropriations to Iowa and Illinois for the "Green Line" total \$230 million, with another \$21 million in matching money required from Iowa State government, and \$45 million from Illinois. The annual operating subsidy required by Iowa alone will be over \$3 million.

Proponents of passenger rail service tout the potential ease of travel, low ticket costs, environmental impacts, student use, and romance. Opponents counter with the history of schedule delays, inconvenience, inflated ridership estimates, cost overruns, and continued subsidies. Both are firmly convinced their opinion is correct. The pro-forma estimates used to justify federal funding are just that — estimates made with certain assumptions and starting points. Business people, even those supporting this idea, will admit that pro-forma numbers are rarely accurate. This leads to the review of current, real data, from a comparable situation.

The Amtrak "Blue Water" line runs between Chicago and Port Huron, Michigan. There is a stop in East Lansing, home of Michigan State University, a Big Ten university with over 41,000 full-time students.¹ Lansing, next door, is the state capital. The population of Ingham County, which includes both towns, is approximately 246,000, and the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is just over 450,000.² In comparison, the University of Iowa has just over 30,000 students. The 2009 Johnson County population estimate is 131,000 (MSA of 147,000); Linn County is 209,000.³ On all three factors Iowa City comes up short — fewer students, smaller total population, and not the state capital. However, the distance from Chicago is exactly the same: 220 miles by car, approximately four hours.⁴ Both towns have easy access to an airport; both have bus service. This makes for an ideal comparison of train, car, plane, and bus options.

The Blue Water line currently runs one train a day between East Lansing and Chicago's Union Station. The weekday cost is \$48; weekend is \$60.⁵ Iowa City-to-Chicago service is estimated at \$75. Two daily buses run from Iowa City to Chicago, four from East Lansing — both cost basically the same. The cost of one-week advance purchase airfare from Capital Region International Airport to O'Hare International is \$378, comparable to the cost of flying from Cedar Rapids to Chicago. However, there are significantly fewer daily flights to Chicago from Lansing, four versus 12 from Cedar Rapids.⁶

Most important is how many people ride the Blue Water train into Chicago. A recent (October 2010) article on the Midwest High-speed Rail Website states that ridership is up

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| Iowa City, Iowa to Union Station, Chicago, Illinois | Passenger Train | Bus | Airline | Driving |
|---|-------------------------|----------------|------------|------------------|
| Estimated Cost | \$75 | \$52 | \$365 | \$35 |
| Travel Time | 5 hours - estimated | 4 hours | 4 hours | 4 hours |
| Schedule - weekday | 2 daily - proposed | 2 daily | 12 daily | your convenience |
| Schedule - weekend | 2 daily - proposed | 1 daily | 21 weekend | your convenience |
| Usage | 250,00/year - estimated | approx. 36,000 | N/A | N/A |

| East Lansing, Michigan to Union Station, Chicago, Illinois | Passenger Train | Bus | Airline | Driving |
|--|------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------|
| Estimated Cost | \$48-\$60 | \$62-\$96 | \$378 | \$35 |
| Travel Time | 4.5 hours | 6.5 hours | 4 hours | 4 hours |
| Schedule - weekday | 1 daily | 4 daily | 4 daily | your convenience |
| Schedule - weekend | 1 daily | 4 daily | 5 weekend | your convenience |
| Usage | 157,700 - actual | N/A | 71,300 | N/A |

Sources: <http://amtrak.com>

<http://www.flylansing.com/Flights.aspx>

<http://www.indiantrails.com/scheduled-service>

<http://www.eairport.org/flight/Departures.pdf>

<http://us.megabus.com/>

<http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p463.pdf>

“nearly 15 percent” over 2009. Total boardings and de-boardings at the East Lansing Station were 58,529 for FY 2010, up from 50,953 in FY 2009. Overall ridership on the entire Port Huron to Chicago route increased almost 19 percent to 157,709 from 132,851.⁷ On-time performance for the last 12 months was 53 percent.⁸

Repeat that again: East Lansing to Chicago ridership was fewer than 30,000 each way, on an established route, from an area with significantly higher population than the Iowa City area. Overall ridership, over a distance greater than the Iowa “spur” route, was less than 160,000. Yet the projections for Iowa City cite a first-year ridership of 246,800. The established Blue Water Line has 36 percent less ridership than the first-year projections for the Green Line. Only one of every two trains is on time. I think I can, I think I can.

Newly elected Governors in Florida, Ohio, and Wisconsin are questioning the wisdom of passenger rail, with Wisconsin planning to turn down \$810 million in federal money. Ohio has \$400 million at stake, and Florida over \$1.25 billion. These Governors have significant concerns about the actual construction and operating costs of passenger rail, about the federal match, and continuing subsidies. The operating subsidy in Wisconsin will be \$7 to 10 million or more per year, and in Florida the project needs over a billion dollars in additional money.⁹

I think I can, I think I can...But maybe I can't and maybe I shouldn't.

(Endnotes)

¹ Office of the Registrar, Michigan State University, <http://www.reg.msu.edu/reportserver?/ROReports/UE-ComparisonStudentEnrollments&term_seq_id=1104> (November 12, 2010).

² U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts and Population Finder, East Lansing and Ingham County, MI, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/26065.html> and Lansing Economic Development Corporation, <http://edc.lansingmi.gov/modules.php?name=Pages&sp_id=79&smenu_id=43> (November 12, 2010).

³ U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts, Johnson and Linn Counties, IA, <<http://quickfacts.census.gov>> (November 12, 2010).

⁴ Distance between Lansing, MI and Union Station, Chicago, IL, Mapquest.com, <<http://www.mapquest.com>> (November 11, (2010).

⁵ Amtrak Fare Finder, <<http://tickets.amtrak.com/itd/amtrak>> (November 12, 2010).

⁶ Flight Schedule, Capital Region International Airport, Lansing, MI, <<http://www.flylansing.com/Portals/0/docs/Flight%20Schedule%20November%202010.pdf>> (November 12, 2010).

⁷ “Amtrak Sets New Ridership Record, Thanks Passengers for Taking the Train,” Amtrak Ridership Record FY10, ATK-10-134 <<http://www.amtrak.com>> (November 12, 2010).

⁸ Amtrak, Route Performance, Train #365, <http://www.amtrak.com/servlet/ContentServer?overrideDefaultTemplate=OTTPageHorizontalRouteOverview&c=AM_Route_C&pagename=am%2FLayout&p=1237405732511&cid=1241245664519&tn=365> (November 12, 2010).

⁹ Michael Cooper, “Rail Service Expansion Imperiled at State Level,” *The New York Times*, October 4, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/05/us/05rail.html?_r=1> (November 12, 2010).

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