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Additional Rail Service Between Harrisburg, Pittsburgh Under Review

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The Pennsylvania Senate is poised to take the next step toward increasing Amtrak passenger train service between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg. (Post-Gazette)

The Pennsylvania Senate is poised to take the next step toward increasing Amtrak passenger train service between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg.

But the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation also is looking into the possibility of supplementing train service with bus service, something Amtrak has done in other regions.

The Senate Transportation Committee voted unanimously to recommend a nine-month review of existing rail studies to determine what it would take to add two more trains on the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg route. Sen. Randy Vulakovich, R-Shaler, who introduced the resolution, said he expects it to be voted on before the Senate adjourns for summer, likely at the end of June.

Additional rail service between Harrisburg, Pittsburgh

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"I see no reason why it will not pass," Mr. Vulakovich said.

The resolution would require the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee to review existing studies within nine months. Another provision, added to appease Lawrence County officials, requires the committee to look separately over the next 12 months at the requirements to add service between Pittsburgh and Cleveland.

But passing the resolution and authorizing the review of studies would only be the first step in the process. Once it is determined what physical improvements would be needed to tracks and stations along the route, PennDOT would have to negotiate an agreement with Amtrak for service and both would have to work with Norfolk Southern Railroad to schedule time on tracks already crowded by freight trains.

Mark Spada of Mt. Lebanon, president of Western Pennsylvanians for Passenger Rail, and Lucinda Beattie, vice president for transportation for the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership, said Western Pennsylvania is overdue for additional passenger rail service. Since 2000, the state has invested about \$400 million to increase passenger service between Harrisburg and Philadelphia from six trains daily to 14.

"This certainly has a good beginning with the Senate resolution," Mr. Spada said. "The intent is to get this done sooner rather than later."

Ms. Beattie said that with the right support the service could begin soon with track and station improvements to follow. Additional service is important to communities such as Latrobe, Altoona, Johnstown, Tyrone and Lewistown, which have few other alternatives, she said.

"What this [review of studies] would give us at the end of the day is an idea of what these communities along the way will need," she said. "There's a lot of support from communities along the way."

PennDOT spokesman Rich Kirkpatrick said the agency welcomes the review of what it would take to increase passenger service. But he said those studies have shown it would cost \$3.75 million to \$6 million to add one more passenger train, plus capital improvements estimated at \$100 million in 2005.

In the interim, Mr. Kirkpatrick said, the agency continues "to explore all options," including supplementing train service with bus service.

In other regions, he said, bus service has been paired with Amtrak service to extend or expand service. For example, in situations where trains originate in New York City or Philadelphia and end their route in Harrisburg, bus service could be scheduled for transfer along a similar route to extend a passenger's trip to Pittsburgh.

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