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High speed rail in Michigan could become a reality if State Senate acts

By Chris Kolb and Dan Gilmartin

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The benefits to Metro Detroit of intercity passenger rail and commuter rail service are clear — economic development, environmental improvement, affordable connections between our communities and convenient travel to and from home and work.

The sticking point has been how to pay for it. Until now.

Successful funding and completion of these projects will mean trains hitting 110 m.p.h. on more than 200 miles of track along the Detroit-to-Chicago corridor — ranked by transportation planners as one of the most viable high speed rail routes outside of the coasts.

The Michigan Department of Transportation estimates they could complete the needed upgrades in less than 24 months. Once completed, metro Detroiters could zip to Chicago in four hours or less, shaving 1.5 hours off the current trip.

The corridor will also have three new or upgraded train stations, paid for with the first round of high speed rail grants. Michigan competed successfully against other states for this money. The Federal Rail Administration warned that states needed to show political support for their existing passenger rail systems and a viable way to fund the local match money to draw the federal funds. Fortunately, the Michigan legislature showed support for Michigan's existing passenger rail system. For the first time in years, FY 2011

budgets passed by the state Senate and House fully funded Michigan's existing passenger rail program from the outset. These commitments strengthened Michigan's high speed rail grant application and helped us draw the \$161 million in federal money for Michigan's high speed rail route.

Moreover, the newly elected governors of Ohio and Wisconsin have pledged to reject almost \$1.3 billion of federal high speed rail grants. When those grants are reallocated, Michigan could cash in.

The second opportunity is legislation — HB 6484 — introduced by Rep. Wayne Schmidt, R-Traverse City. This bill would help pay for our portion of the required federal match for high speed rail and other similar projects being developed. It's critical that the state senate pass this bill and the governor sign it into law. These funding opportunities could put our state on track. It's a game changer for Michigan. Republicans and Democrats, chambers of commerce, labor, local governments and environmental groups are now speaking the same language.

The window of opportunity is closing. Urge your state senator to support HB 6484 so we can draw \$161 million in federal rail funds (and perhaps more) and start building the regional rail we've talked about for so long.

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