

Strickland looking for Amtrak to link state's 3-C corridor

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COLUMBUS -- Travelers who use Interstate 71 to get between Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati could get another mode of transportation a few years.

Governor Ted Strickland has asked Amtrak CEO Alex Kummant to begin passenger railroad studies on the 3-C corridor, as a potential rail connection between Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati is called.

"This is an incremental start," said Ken Sislak, board member of All Aboard Ohio -- a non-profit organization focused on public transportation and passenger rail service throughout the state. "I think the 3-C corridor is a great idea."

A study is a feasible step in the intended creation of an Ohio passenger railway system. The state has been looking into a passenger rail line along the 3-C corridor for years, said Sislak. The difference in this move is the focus is on a reasonable and immediate possibility, rather than a complex high-speed network that could be decades away.

These trains wouldn't be slow, however. They would travel at speeds up to 79 mph, "Almost as fast as the trucks on I-71," Sislak quipped.

Director of All Aboard, Andrew Bremer, said that the passenger system would operate on the tracks owned by CSX and Norfolk Southern and be modeled after systems operating in Maine and Illinois. There was a 3-C survey completed in 2001 but since then, Bremer said the costs have shifted and more information is needed.

While Amtrak has created successful systems around Chicago, California and in New England, All Aboard members mentioned the lack of attention that had been directed toward Ohio, despite the largely populated cities that dot the state.

"The governor has asked Amtrak to take a look at the 3-C corridor," said Stu Nicholson of the Ohio Rail Development Commission. Nicholson said the move questions the original proposal which would take 8-10 years by asking, "Is there a way we can get something up and running sooner?" The new proposed survey and project, if all facets succeed, could be operating within three years.

Nicholson noted that Strickland included an interest for "Amtrak to sit down with freight owners," since the railroads own the corridors. In order for a passenger line to open, there would need to be incentives for the freight companies.

With Amtrak stations already located in Cleveland and Cincinnati, Amtrak representative Marc Magliari said that the corridor would simply connect the current lines that run east and west. Magliari said that Amtrak has trains departing from Cleveland four times a day,

two east and two west.

The line could have multiple stops along the corridor, even outside the major cities. Possible stops could even include places like Grafton or Wellington, Sislak said.

The prices would cost just a bit more than a distance-comparable Greyhound bus ride, Sislak said. The opening of a passenger rail line along the 3-C corridor, no matter how modest, would be the first step in creating an efficient system. Sislak said that this first step is crucial in proving what he believes to be a "tremendous latent demand."

Sislak noted that the systems currently in operation in California, Chicago and New England all started small and grew based on use and interest. "If you build it, people will come," Sislak said.