

Lawmakers discuss proposed passenger rail line between Duluth and Minneapolis

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With the DFL now in control of the Minnesota Senate, supporters of the proposed Northern Lights Express passenger rail service hope it will get the funding it needs to move forward.

The NLX would run between the Twin Cities and the Twin Ports, with stops along the way in Coon Rapids, Cambridge and Hinckley.

The line would be run by Amtrak on rail lines owned by BNSF.

The current bill calls for the state to allocate \$99 million in fiscal year 2024, which would make more than \$300 million in federal funding available.

Supporters say it is one of the “most shovel-ready” projects to be eligible under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act that became law in 2021. More than \$16 billion is allocated for intercity rail projects.

“We know that this federal money is going to go to projects across the country, so we say let’s bring it here, let’s bring it to Minnesota and connect all these people along the route,” said Sen. Jennifer McEwen, DFL-Duluth, during a Senate Transportation Committee hearing last week.

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A number of business leaders and officials from the corridor also testified during the hearing, touting benefits beyond just transportation.

“If approved, the NLX would provide a cost-effective way to bring tourist and other business opportunities to Hinckley and the rest of our region,” Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Chief Executive Melanie Benjamin told the committee. “Our hope is that this would stimulate other businesses from retail to industry.”

But during that same hearing, Republicans indicated their opposition to funding the plan will continue. Their concerns include the cost of the project and whether service would be reliable.

Sen. Jeff Howe, R-Rockville, cited the Northstar Line, which cut service during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"As we go forward and we're starting to look at this, ridership on the commuter rail, that's one of the reasons it's plummeted on the Northstar rail, because it wasn't reliable," Howe said.

Supporters say there are several differences between the Northstar and the proposed NLX, including plans to clear potential rail bottlenecks that could cause delays for both passenger service and freight. The proposal also includes upgrades to more than 100 crossings.

The allocation will likely be included in budget legislation later this session.