

Publication: Jnl Final Edition 8/2005-today; Date: Aug 21, 2008; Section: News; Page: A8



Amtrak Can't Keep Up With Demand

By Michael Tarm The Associated Press

CHICAGO — Amtrak faces a new problem around the nation: The passenger rail service that once struggled to woo riders is now so popular amid soaring gas prices, it fears that it soon won't have enough trains to meet demand.

Already record-high ridership is expected to grow to 50 million riders a year in 10 years, from about 25 million now, meaning Amtrak must double its fleet to meet demand, said President and CEO Alex Kummant on Wednesday.

Nationally, 2,750,278 passengers used Amtrak in July, a 14 percent surge from the year before and the highest ridership for a single month in the service's 37-year history.

"In a way, it's a good problem to have," Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari said. "But we can't meet demand with the current fleet."

Kummant met with U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat, and other officials in Chicago on Wednesday to discuss how Amtrak can upgrade its service, including by adding cars to some lines in Illinois.

But none of those cars would be new. Amtrak, whose total fleet includes 1,500 cars and 400 locomotives — most of them first put into service decades ago — hasn't added a new passenger car since the mid-'90s. Instead, it's had to renovate old ones.

Amtrak has about 60 out-of-service cars that could be refurbished at \$700,000 apiece, then put into service, Kummant said, but Amtrak has enough money to overhaul only 12 of them.

Durbin has introduced legislation that aims to revive the train car industry. His proposal includes seeking authorization for Amtrak to issue up to \$2.8 billion in bonds annually to pay for such projects.

The senator criticized the Bush administration for failing to support Amtrak, saying the president has threatened to veto an Amtrak reauthorization bill that has already passed both the House and Senate.

"This administration came to town saying that Amtrak was a goner," said Durbin. "But look what's happened. People are sitting on these trains, using them, begging for opportunities."