

# Commuters argue merits of Lincoln-to-Omaha train

## I-80 construction, congestion top list of concerns

By **JESSICA FARGEN**  
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### Legislature

Sen. Shelley Kiel of Omaha has a vision of riding on a train at speeds of up to 120 mph when she commutes from Omaha to Lincoln.

Kiel, like many Omaha-to-Lincoln commuters, said she is sick of traffic congestion, continual construction and aggressive drivers on I-80.

LB829 is the first step to making her vision a reality. The bill, sponsored by Kiel, would set up the Nebraska Transit and Rail Advisory Council Act — creating a council to assess the need, cost and possible reality of a commuter train between Lincoln and Omaha. And even further in the future, Kiel would like to see the train extend across the state.

The idea was sparked by a letter she read several years ago by Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, D-N.Y., outlining the benefits of commuter trains. That letter got her thinking.

Cities such as Portland, Ore., Denver and St. Louis have commuter trains, Kiel said.

"I thought, 'Why not?'" she said. "Why not Nebraska?"

Wahoo Sen. Curt Bromm, who is chairman of the Transportation Committee, also thinks it is a sound idea.

"The increased line of traffic is nothing short of amazing," Bromm said of Lincoln-to-Omaha traffic on I-80. "We know that there is change in that part of the state, and we need to accommodate that change."

Bromm said commuters on I-80 between Lincoln and Omaha complain of traffic congestion and perpetual construction.

It is not going to get much better, Bromm said, which is why if Nebraska wants a commuter train, now is the time to start thinking about it.

"As development increases in that corridor it's going to be more and more

expensive to consider any kind of a commuter system," Bromm said. "I'm glad that we're looking at the practicality and need for it now."

In the fall, an interim study found that a traditional railroad train would be the most cost-effective and safest mode and assessed the potential number of riders, Kiel said.

But Ellis Tompkins, intermodal transportation engineer for the Department of Roads, said before the council is set up, legislators need to further study the probability of people ditching their cars for a ride on a commuter train.

"If you look at society today no one wants to leave the comfort of their cars," he said. "We would like to determine what the feasibility is."

"Are there enough riders to justify doing it before we get into it?"

This is what Bromm also saw as the biggest drawback to the commuter train and LB829.

"It has a lot of appeal," Bromm said. "I think the major stumbling blocks will be determining whether or not it's cost-effective and determining and assessing the need for it."

Tompkins saw other problems on the horizon.

A viable bus route does not exist between Lincoln and Omaha, he said. And there's also a dilemma for drivers who get off at the train stop in downtown Lincoln and Omaha and don't have a car to get to other parts of the city. Besides, the train could cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

Kiel said he envisions the train running from the Old Market in Omaha to the Haymarket in Lincoln. An additional set of tracks could be built along the existing Burlington Northern tracks along Highway 6.

Unlike existing trains, the new commuter train would not cross high-

“*Are there enough riders to justify doing it before we get into it?*”

**ELLIS TOMPKINS**  
Department of Roads engineer

ways and would be more technological-ly advanced, with features such as "tilt technology" allowing trains to maintain speed around corners.

During the trains' off hours, Burlington Northern could use the new tracks, she said.

Funding for the train would come from a majority of federal and private money, but state funds also would be needed, she said.

A federal transportation bill passed last year provides significant funds for state commuter rail projects, said Kiel, who spent the weekend in Chicago at the High Speed Rail Conference.

Dan Lutz, president of Pro-Rail Nebraska, shares Kiel's vision for a high-speed train in Nebraska.

Besides relieving traffic congestion, the train could accommodate the increased visitors to the developing entertainment complex near Mahoney State Park and the Strategic Air Command Museum near Ashland. But convincing Nebraskans to jump aboard a movement for a high-speed train is dependent on getting the word out and the reliability of the train, he said.

"We think that there is going to need to be some education involved," Lutz said.

"We think that if it has new, modern equipment, and schedules are on time, that it would win over quite a few of the potential commuters that could use it."

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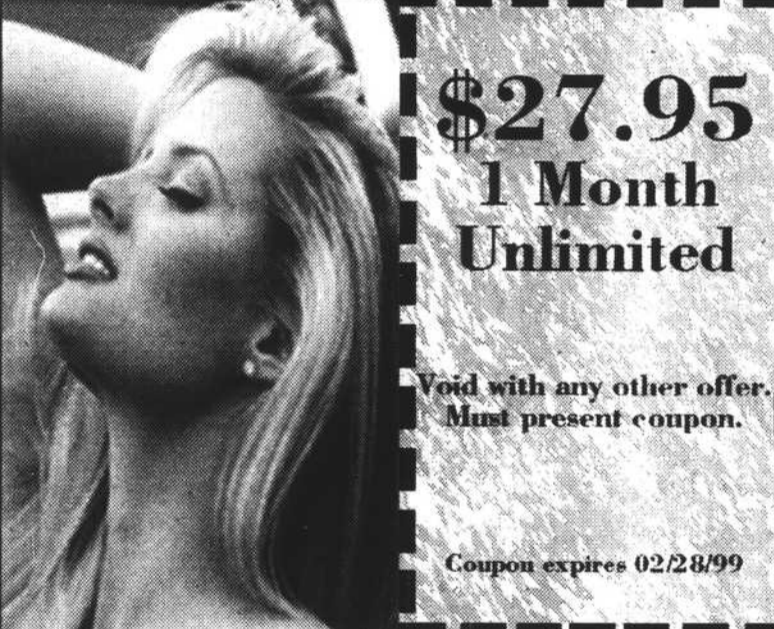
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