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AS I SEE IT: Passenger train ridership soars along with gas prices
By Frank Busalacchi
Special to The Star

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As never before, Americans are frustrated by the soaring cost of filling their cars with gas and they are flocking to passenger trains.

Amtrak, America's passenger railroad, is on track to carry an all-time record of 27 million passengers this year, 2 million more than in 2007. In May, many routes were reporting double-digit increases in ridership.

On the Kansas City to St. Louis route, ridership was up by an astounding 84.4 percent. Amtrak reports that last May was the busiest month in its 37-year history, with nearly 11 percent more riders nationwide.

Federal data show that intercity passenger rail consumes 21 percent less energy per passenger mile than autos, and 17 percent less than airplanes. If this bump in ridership is sustained, it will help hold down oil consumption.

But the ridership increase forces another important issue: capacity. In many parts of America, trains are sold out.

While more people are traveling by train, the number of rail cars in service has not increased, and many lines have been unable to add frequencies to keep up with demand.

In the Midwest, we again have standing-room-only problems on our Hiawatha service between Milwaukee and Chicago, even after working with Amtrak to add coaches to trains just a year ago.

Rail equipment doesn't come cheap. The answer lies in purchasing "next-generation train equipment" and, at the same time, refurbishing cars that have been sidelined. It can cost several hundred thousand dollars to refurbish a rail car.

Amtrak's funding has been unstable since 2002. Congress has continued to appropriate funds for grants to Amtrak each year since 2003, but the uncertainty has made planning difficult.

The federal government supports all forms of transportation in some way. But other modes are not subject to such a limited and unpredictable funding process.

It is time for Congress to pass legislation that reauthorizes Amtrak and also provides a stable 80 percent federal/20 percent state grant program for intercity passenger rail service.

The Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 is before Congress. The legislation would provide \$4.2 billion in 80/20 federal/state grants for needed

infrastructure and equipment.

Of these funds, \$2.5 billion is for 80/20 grants to states for intercity passenger rail improvement projects, and \$1.75 billion is for state high-speed rail projects where speeds are expected to reach 110 miles per hour.

We don't want gasoline prices to double again before we begin the major upgrades that America's passenger rail system needs.

Frank Busalacchi is Wisconsin's secretary of transportation, chair of the States for Passenger Rail Coalition, and a member of The National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission. He lives in Brookville, Wis.