

Breaking into the future



The Pantagraph/STEVE SMEDLEY

Federal and state officials join representatives of the town of Normal and Amtrak for a groundbreaking ceremony Saturday at the site for the new transportation center in uptown Normal.

Officials tout hub's benefits at groundbreaking

By Mary Ann Ford
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Local, state and federal officials touted the economic benefits of the uptown transportation center before turning the first ceremonial shovel of dirt near the site Saturday.

"I believe taxpayer money is well invested," said Sen. Dick Durbin. "The high-speed rail corridor will bring much more development. If we don't spend money to put people to work, we'll never get out of this recession."

Normal Mayor Chris Koos said construction of the transportation center, on the south side of Beaufort Street west of the Children's Discovery Museum, will bring more than 300 "good-paying jobs" to the community.

Ronn Morehead, president of Bloomington-Normal Trades & La-



With Amtrak Chicago-bound train No. 302 in the background, U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., addresses the crowd during the groundbreaking ceremony Saturday.

bor Assembly, said that is particularly positive at a time when 40 percent to 55 percent of laborers have lost their jobs because of the recession. Morehead said 70 to 85 percent of a construction worker's pay is spent in his

own community.

Besides construction workers, Durbin said more than 300 people will be put to work building 130 railroad cars for Amtrak, for the first time in 25

SEE FUTURE / PAGE A10



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Amtrak's Chicago-bound train No. 302 arrives at the existing Amtrak Station during the groundbreaking ceremony Saturday at the site of the new Multimodal Transportation Center.

FUTURE

FROM A1

years. Morehead said he is hopeful some of the cars may be built in Aurora and Southern Illinois.

U.S. Rep. Debbie Halvorson, D-Crete, said the center also will bring more visitors to the community who will shop at local businesses.

"Stations are one of my great interests and as a former mayor I know they are engines of economic development," said Amtrak Board Chairman Thomas Carper, former mayor of Macomb.

Carper said studies show 81 percent of families and individuals want to live near transit access.

The center, which will serve Amtrak, city buses, intrastate buses and taxis, will begin accommodating passengers in about two years. Uptown Development Director Wayne Aldrich said recent test pilings for the foundation went well and work on the actual piles will begin Monday.

By the end of the year, Aldrich said, passers-by will see a steel structure. The center is expected to be complete by March 2012



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An artist's rendering shows the plan for the transportation hub.

with move-in by June 2012, Aldrich said.

Koos said it was almost 10 years ago when then-Mayor Kent Karraker and City Manager Mark Peterson sat down with Durbin to float the idea of federal funding for the center.

Koos thanked all the current and past federal and state representatives for their continued support of the project.

"(State) Rep. Dan Brady worked as hard as anyone," he said. "U.S. Rep. Tim Johnson has been onboard since day one"

Halvorson joined in 2008 and has been a "tenacious supporter," Koos said.

"The biggest champion

of the project since day one is Sen. Dick Durbin," he said. "He understood the project as soon as he heard it. He understands the critical importance of rail to foster development."

Federal Transit Administration Administrator Peter Rogoff said it says a lot that the project received \$22 million in a Transportation Investments Generating Economic Recovery grant.

Rogoff said the Normal project rose to the top because it embodied President Barack Obama's vision for economic recovery by putting people to work; had such advocates at Durbin and Halvorson; and was ready to go.