

## **Doyle backs federal aid for Metra rail line extension**

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RACINE - Gov. Jim Doyle said Thursday he backed a plan by Milwaukee officials to redirect more than \$91 million in federal aid toward an extension of a commuter rail line.

"I'm certainly going to go along with what local officials have decided," Doyle said after a press conference at the Bray Center in Racine. "I'm not going to get in their way on this."

The \$91.5 million would go a long way toward paying for the proposed 32-mile extension of Metra's Union Pacific North Line to Milwaukee, and could help get the first trains rolling north from Kenosha a year earlier than if government officials had to find that money elsewhere, a regional planning official said.

However, it still may be 2007 before the first train leaves the station, said Ken Yunker, assistant director of the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.

The funds in question are what remain of a \$289 million appropriation 12 years ago towards a bus-only highway from Milwaukee to Waukesha. Since then, some of the money has gone back to the federal government, while other funds have been used toward Milwaukee County projects like the demolition of the Park East Freeway.

Spending the remaining money on Metra would take approval from Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker, Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist, Doyle, and the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Transit Administration.

Norquist has already pledged support for freeing up the money.

U.S. Rep Paul Ryan - who called the \$91.5 million pledge "a major step toward making commuter rail a reality" - said he expects FTA approval of the request, especially given its local support.

"We will make it happen," the Janesville Republican said Thursday. "The question is whether it's easy lifting or heavy lifting. I just need to get all the state and local leadership on track for us to move forward.

"This project seemed to be on life support a month ago. Now it's on the fast track."

An FTA spokesman did not return a phone call seeking comment.

The Metra expansion plan endorsed by regional planners would cost \$152.1 million to start, but by 2005 inflation could push that figure to \$171.9 million, a study showed. Yearly operating costs could run \$32.4 million by 2009.

More than \$7 million in federal funds have already been earmarked for the rail line that would run through Kenosha, Somers, Racine, Caledonia, Oak Creek, South Milwaukee, Cudahy-St. Francis, and Milwaukee.

Lawmakers have also asked for another \$4 million as part of the 2004 federal transportation budget.

By securing the \$91.5 million in existing Interstate Cost Estimate (ICE) funds, project leaders would have that much less money to worry about competing for on the federal level.

"It will likely remove uncertainty from the process," Yunker said.

Last month, Walker urged the Department of Transportation to spend the ICE money on the Marquette Interchange, in exchange for the state funding the Milwaukee County bus system's transit capital program over a span of 10 years.

However, earlier this week - during a meeting with area mayors and county executives in which they agreed to move ahead with the project - Walker said he wanted the money used instead for Metra.

The funding pledge follows the consensus reached earlier this week by Walker, Norquist, Kenosha Mayor John Antaramian, Kenosha County Executive Allan Kehl, Racine Mayor Gary Becker and Racine County Executive William McReynolds, who have committed to each finding their share of a \$4 million preliminary engineering study - around \$67,000 for each spread over two years. Most of the money for the two-year study, around \$3.2 million, would come from the federal government, and the state has pledged another \$400,000.

"I'm certainly encouraged by (the local governments') wanting to move forward on this," Doyle said Thursday.

State officials have said they want local governments to kick in a share of the cost of getting the commuter rail line up and running. They have also said they do not want to take the lead in making sure the project comes to fruition, as recommended by planners in August.

Ryan said hopes the increased federal funding will spur local commitment to the project.

More federal dollars could also flow from a \$121.7 million funding request Ryan and others made in the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, the federal government's six-year transportation bill that now won't be debated until 2004, Ryan said. He has said he does not expect to receive all of the money, and, even if the long-term request is approved, it will still take separate federal approval before any of the money is spent on the project.

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