

Commuters find trains less stressful

BY NORMAN SILER
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Sunrise on Sunday brings promise of a bright, relaxing day ahead, for leisure time with family and friends, for church and yard work, for anything less hectic than the Monday through Friday pace after sunrise.

Some households in Kenosha and Walworth counties face a less stressful commute because a job in Illinois can be reached by riding a Metra commuter train. From Harvard, from McHenry and Fox Lake, from Antioch and Woodstock, and from Kenosha.

Those commuters flock each workday morning, as the summer sun arises to warm, then bake each day, to bike racks and parking lots at Metra stations an hour or more train ride from downtown Chicago. Then they settle in with a newspaper, sometimes a cup of coffee, and they relax for the most of their daily commute. Or they nap; or they network with other regular Metra commuters.

Once upon a time that option was available to some in southeast Wisconsin, for commuting to Milwaukee. But Wisconsin opted for less reliance on train-commutes years ago; many states and metropolitan areas did also as car travel became routine, as highways grew wider and more plentiful. As the Interstate highway system grew and grew.

Some metro areas did not relinquish their commuter trains; Chicago is one of them.

During the 1990s, highways continued to grow, but not enough to handle the cars eager

Guest Columnist



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to travel on them. Clogged southern California freeways, the car-commute role model for America, so badly frustrated so many commuters that costly public transit projects were devised and built. During that era of reevaluating commuting infrastructure, Milwaukee considered a light rail system, recognizing as other metro areas did that ever wider expressways could not solve the congestion. But Milwaukee's proposal did not connect with the well-run Chicago area commuter train system, Metra, and was controversial, in part due to cost.

Also in the mid-1990s, resumption of train-commuting along the first Chicago-Milwaukee track (built in the 1850s) emerged as a possibility, and Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (verified its feasibility in 1998, after a preliminary study. A second study looking in much greater detail at Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee (K-R-M) commuter trains confirmed that a modest service level could start up and communities along the route near Lake Michigan rallied support to the proposal. Cudahy, Racine and Kenosha each devised a transit plan for linking bus service to

the proposed train service. Somers is among several communities with a tentative plan for development at a commuter train station, and around it.

Northeast Illinois counties and communities have much more experience at adding stations along a Metra track, and they consistently plan for expansion because congestion continues to worsen on the region's expressways. They consistently plan for new residences, new retail development, new offices and other types of employers.

Economic growth and its more basic cousin, economic survival, are consistently cited by the business districts and corporations which endorse K-R-M commuter trains. Convenient travel for leisure activities, as much as for commuting to and from work, are sought for employees and for customers. And in the established neighborhoods, which were built before cars dominated our travel, the need for alternatives is most evident.

Those neighborhoods and those mature business districts prevail along the track for proposed K-R-M commuting, more so than any other commuting route anywhere in Wisconsin. So the most cost-effective way to improve travel, especially for commuting, in the Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee shoreline corridor is to add commuter trains, to reestablish an option which most other areas lost years ago because their track was no longer used and was removed.

Some of the numerous pieces in this labyrinthine proposal are in place, such as the new Racine bus transfer center and the Kenosha Metra station. Some pieces are in growth plans in company offices and in downtown renewal goals. Seen together, they hold for our future in southeast Wisconsin along the Lake Michigan shoreline a bright prospect for commuter bike racks and parking lots to emulate the new and old commuter rail services elsewhere in America: in northeast Illinois, in Nashville, in the Twin Cities of Minnesota.

K-R-M commuter trains will add a key component to an even larger project: remaking the former Rust Belt sites near the lakeshore into prosperity powerhouses which energize and brighten our towns and cities, and all southeast Wisconsin.