

Rail benefits go beyond transportation

BY PHILIP C. EVENSON
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The recent award of a \$400,000 state grant from Wisconsin Department of Transportation Secretary Frank Busalacchi to Kenosha County Executive Allan Kehl will permit the proposed Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee commuter rail extension to move ahead one more step toward becoming a reality. The grant — together with a federal grant and local staff support — will cover the cost of the next phase of project development. That phase will refine the physical and operational plans for the commuter rail proposal, prepare an environmental impact statement, and develop a funding plan.

The proposed project would extend the existing commuter rail service that now operates between Chicago and Kenosha to Racine and Milwaukee. The extension would provide a continuous, seamless service along the entire 85-mile lakeshore corridor between downtown Milwaukee and downtown Chicago. As presently envisioned, the

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extension would provide seven round-trips on weekdays between Kenosha, Racine, and Milwaukee, and as well, between these areas and the Chicago area.

The benefits of the proposed commuter rail extension include:

■ **Improved accessibility** — Kenosha, Milwaukee, and Racine area residents would have improved access to jobs in the corridor, not only in southeastern Wisconsin, but also in Lake and Cook Counties in Illinois,

including the Chicago north shore suburbs and downtown Chicago. The Milwaukee, Racine, and Kenosha commuter rail stations are located in proximity to low-income and minority populations and will particularly improve their access to jobs.

■ **Economic development** — Commuter rail will improve the connection between the Milwaukee, Chicago, Racine, and Kenosha areas, permitting this interconnected bi-state region and its components to better compete nationally and globally. Employers will be able to better attract employees whose spouse may need to work in one of the other communities along this 85-mile corridor.

■ **Neighborhood development and redevelopment** — Commuter rail will positively influence land use development and redevelopment in the station areas with attendant increases in land and property values. Higher density, higher value residential and office development may be expected to locate near stations along with retail and ser-

vice businesses. A “ripple effect” will occur with neighborhoods surrounding station areas being positively influenced and experiencing similar benefits.

■ **Fast, convenient, and attractive service** — Commuter rail would not be affected by traffic congestion, would be much faster than buses, and for longer trips during congested rush hours would be as fast, or faster, than commuting by car.

■ **Reliability** — Commuter rail is extremely reliable, as it is not affected by highway traffic congestion, or by inclement weather, including severe winter storms.

■ **Positive effect on highway system and environment** — Commuter rail can help slow the growth in highway traffic by encouraging some trips to be made by mass transit rather than automobile. During the more than a decade that Interstate 94 will be under construction from the Illinois state line to downtown Milwaukee, commuter rail would be an

invaluable travel alternative. Commuter rail will also contribute to reductions in transportation air pollutant emissions and energy consumption.

The benefits are substantial and broad — not just traditional transportation benefits, but land use and economic development benefits as well. These are the reasons commuter rail continues to be improved and expanded in metropolitan areas that already have it, and is being introduced in other metropolitan areas. In the Chicago area, commuter rail is considered a valuable community asset and is recognized not only as an important transportation service, but also as a focus for stable, more efficient, higher density and higher value development. The potential to realize these benefits is why a growing number of public officials and business leaders in the Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee corridor are in support of bringing to fruition the commuter rail extension.