

Transportation study group rejects the bus option

Trains would be faster and would spur other development

John Valaske, a frequent contributor to our Voice of the People columns, brought up an interesting idea in a letter that was published Wednesday. Instead of developing commuter rail service from Kenosha to Milwaukee, he suggested, why not try express buses?

Buses, he pointed out, could be put in service right away, and they could be changed to meet the demand.

It's a good question. Trains and buses both move people. Why not take the less expensive option?



Steve Lund

The Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission has an advisory group that has been studying transportation options in the Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee corridor. The group has issued a preliminary recommendation for an extension of the rail system from Kenosha to

Milwaukee with stops in Somers, Racine, Caledonia, Oak Creek, South Milwaukee, and Cudahy-St. Francis. The current hope is for the system to be operating in 2009.

The group also looked at buses and at a combination of buses and trains that would have trains extending from Kenosha to Racine and buses going between Racine and Milwaukee.

Ultimately, the committee rejected the buses, despite the difference in costs, which are substantial. Initially, the bus system was estimated at about \$20 million, compared to about \$150 million for the train system. Since then, the estimated cost of the train has increased to \$172 million.

The majority, perhaps 80 percent, of the funding to build

either a bus or a train system would probably come from the federal government. The rest may come from the state or a combination of state and local sources. At this point there is no funding proposal, but the state has provided the money to keep the studies going.

"The price difference is substantial," said Ken Yunker, deputy director of the regional planning commission, "but the bus alternative is simply inferior."

Some of the train system's advantages over buses have to do with transportation, and some have to do with secondary effects on land use and economic development.

According to the study, trains would be faster, more reliable, more convenient and more comfortable, all of which would help

the trains attract more riders than a bus system. The study anticipates that a commuter train system would handle twice as many passenger-miles as a commuter bus system.

The other advantages are difficult to measure directly, but are significant, said Yunker.

Simply stated, railroad stations stimulate development in the surrounding neighborhoods, and bus stations don't. Rail stations are permanent, so business and residential developers know that it will be there for the long term.

Bus lines are flexible — that's one of their advantages — but a bus station is easily moved, so it doesn't provide the same stimulus to develop surrounding property.

According to the study, a commuter rail station can be

expected to promote the development of retail business and restaurants that serve commuters, plus residential and office development.

Connecting all the communities in the Chicago-Kenosha-Milwaukee corridor will also have benefits for economic development of the region, according to the study.

"After comparing for land development, redevelopment and economic development impacts, they believe that the dollar value of those greatly outweigh the substantial difference in costs between retail and bus systems," said Yunker.

I didn't find it in the report, but there is another factor: Trains are more fun. That should count for something.

Steve Lund is editorial page editor of the Kenosha News.