

Region's officials favor Metra link

**\$91.5 million might
be used to extend
line to downtown**

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Top local leaders agreed Monday to move forward with plans to extend Chicago's Metra commuter trains from Kenosha to downtown Milwaukee, Racine and the southern suburbs — with the help of \$91.5 million in long-unused federal money.

That agreement simulta-

neously boosts the chances for the \$152 million commuter rail project while dimming hopes for the \$300 million Milwaukee guided electric bus system that was previously scheduled to get the federal dollars.

Although Monday's deal doesn't guarantee the commuter rail extension will be completed, it keeps the concept alive for two more years of study and debate not only on technical issues, but also on the sensitive political questions of who will pay for buying and running the trains and upgrading the tracks, said Kerry Thomas,

spokeswoman for the Southeastern Wisconsin Coalition for Transit Now.

Also, adding the \$91.5 million to \$7 million in federal money already appropriated and another \$4 million under consideration for commuter rail would bring the project about two-thirds of the way to its funding goal, and even more federal money could be available, said Thomas and top aides to Kenosha County Executive Allan Kehl and Milwaukee Mayor John O. Norquist.

"Economic development is

Please see **METRA, 8A**

Area leaders move forward on plans to extend Metra trains downtown

METRA, From 1A

the focal point" of the commuter rail plan, said Kehl, who called a closed-door summit meeting in his office to hammer out the deal.

Supporters expect the trains to improve commuting and business links between the communities on the route and to stimulate development near stations. Kehl, Kenosha Mayor

John Antaramian and Racine County Executive Bill McReynolds all described the deal as a victory for regional cooperation and development.

As recommended by a Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission study panel earlier this year, the 33-mile rail project would extend the Metra line on existing freight rail tracks to the Town of Somers, Racine, the

Town of Caledonia, Oak Creek, South Milwaukee, Cudahy and Milwaukee's downtown Amtrak depot.

Trains would run seven round trips each weekday, with three round trips each Saturday, Sunday and holiday. Shuttle buses would link the Cudahy station with Mitchell International Airport.

Because the trip from Milwaukee to Chicago would take about 2½ hours, the line isn't intended to compete with Amtrak's service, which takes about 1½ hours, although the fare is expected to be significantly less than Amtrak's \$20 one-way price. Instead, the commuter rail line would be aimed at suburb-to-city and suburb-to-suburb trips by commuters, shoppers and festival visitors.

Norquist, Kehl, Antaramian and Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker attended Monday's meeting, just two blocks from Kenosha's downtown Metra station. McReynolds and Racine Mayor Gary Becker didn't attend but conferred earlier with Kehl.

At the summit, the leaders agreed to find the money for the \$400,000 local share of the project's \$4 million preliminary engineering phase, according to several partici-

pants and their aides. The federal and state governments are paying the other \$3.6 million.

Facing tight local budgets and rebellious taxpayers, Norquist, Walker and McReynolds had previously refused to use property tax dollars for preliminary engineering.

Under Monday's deal, each of the three cities and three counties will come up with \$33,333 a year for two years, leaving it to local officials whether to raise that money through private donations, use tax money or contribute staff time or other "in-kind" donations, said Kehl, McReynolds, Antaramian and Jim Rowen, Norquist's policy chief.

The leaders also endorsed the study's recommendation for the state Department of Transportation to run the rail line, instead of a new regional transportation authority, Rowen said. State officials on the study panel abstained from the panel's final vote in protest of that recommendation.

Norquist and Walker also agreed to use the \$91.5 million that has been sitting idle for 12 years, Rowen said. However, that agreement still requires approval from Gov. Jim Doyle and the federal government.

Repeated attempts to reach Walker and Becker for com-

ment were unsuccessful.

Walker previously had questioned whether it was legal to use that money, but it appeared that might have been a misunderstanding over using it for preliminary engineering rather than construction.

The \$91.5 million is all that's left of \$289 million appropriated in 1991 to build a bus-only highway from Milwaukee to Waukesha. Over the years, the federal government took away \$48 million and the rest became entangled in disputes over whether to build a light rail system or add bus and carpool lanes to I-94.

A 1999 deal among Norquist, then-Milwaukee County Executive F. Thomas Ament and then-Gov. Tommy G. Thompson divided most of the remaining money among several other projects, leaving \$91.5 million to implement the recommendations of the Milwaukee Connector study.

The connector project, led by the Wisconsin Center District, is aimed at linking downtown, Miller Park, the east side and the north side with public transit. A guided electric bus system has replaced light rail as the leading option in that study, although regular buses remain an option.

Walker has opposed both light rail and guided electric buses, and his opposition has blocked the connector study from moving forward. That stalemate led Norquist to search for another way to use the \$91.5 million before he leaves office Dec. 31.

Rowen said Monday's agreement doesn't necessarily kill the connector, but it does show that the commuter rail line is a higher priority. He said he hoped the connector eventually would be built to provide transportation around downtown Milwaukee, partly for people who come there by commuter rail or Amtrak.

The state Department of Transportation agreed to cooperate with the connector study as part of the settlement of two civil rights complaints that accused the state of favoring freeways for white suburbanites over public transit for urban minorities.

Transportation Secretary Frank Busalacchi has indicated that settlement will play a major role in his department's position.

Kehl said he expected that local leaders would move forward with formal action within the next month to start the preliminary engineering process on commuter rail.