

OUR PERSPECTIVE

# Metra rail chugs up the mountain

The push to extend Metra from Kenosha to Racine and on to Milwaukee is starting to sound like “The Little Engine That Could.”

With a little huffing and puffing Congress two weeks ago passed a new \$286 billion transportation bill. Among the whistles and bells was \$80 million for the Chicago-Milwaukee Metra extension. That’s a good chunk of money toward the total cost of \$152 million for the project.

That doesn’t mean the Little Engine has crested the mountain by any means. Coming up with more dollars — and some of them will doubtlessly have to be local tax dollars — will take some more huffing and puffing.

But there has been other good news for Metra expansion recently as well. The state Legislature has given the go-ahead for the creation of a Regional Transit Authority that could operate the line and the transportation bill also authorizes close to \$4 million for renovation of Milwaukee’s downtown Amtrak

station which could convert it into a transportation hub that serves buses and commuter rail as well.

Rail expansion might also get a boost in the next few years from the reconstruction of the Interstate 94 corridor from Milwaukee south to the Illinois line — the next scheduled reconstruction work on the Interstate system.

Some rail backers think that work slated to start in four years and the stress that congestion will put on vehicular traffic might make it a good time to debut expanded rail service. Dovetail the rail debut with the I-94 roadwork might also make the rail project eligible for additional federal dollars to ease road congestion or cut pollution.

All of which makes the rails seem more aligned for the possibilities of Metra extension and that’s good news for southeastern Wisconsin. The next two years could well prove crucial ones in diversifying the region’s transportation abilities.