

OURVIEW

Metra extension makes dollars and sense

Sam Johnson wants to polish up the rusting idea of restoring affordable rail service from Chicago to Milwaukee.

Good for him ... and good for Waukesha.

While Johnson recently helped call a summit of local leaders to discuss extending the Metra service north from Kenosha to Milwaukee, it will end up being those political leaders who will have to clear the way for the extension.

Johnson certainly is interested in the extension so he can more easily attract employees to his Racine location of the S.C. Johnson & Son Inc. plant. Yet people throughout southeastern Wisconsin would also benefit.

Waukesha County residents might soon be able to take a bus to Milwaukee and hop a train to Chicago and back, opening up a whole new employment market.

Local companies like GE Medical Systems and Quad/Graphics

Inc. could hope to solicit potential employees from Illinois, as well.

While Amtrak runs a service along the outskirts of the cities along the Lake Michigan coast, it runs at a higher cost and with fewer routes than the Metra extension would offer.

The idea that has been advocated by the summit of local leaders would focus on offering seven round trips daily, with three round trips Saturdays, Sundays and holidays.

It would also allow people to more easily travel between Racine and Kenosha and Milwaukee inner downtowns, a service the rapidly fading Amtrak line does not provide.

The project might well be on track already except for the disagreement about who should pay.

State Department of Transportation Secretary Frank Busalacchi does not appear to really be on board, as he recently insisted that the local govern-

ments pay a significant share of the anticipated \$152 million cost to resurrect service along the former Chicago and North Western Rail Co. lines that parallel the lake shore.

But Gov. Jim Doyle seems more committed to the plan. He left \$400,000 in a strapped state budget to help pay for preliminary engineering work. And, setting a different tone than Busalacchi, he recently said the local governments would only be expected to make a "symbolic" cost-sharing payment.

Once the project begins, as much as 80 percent to 90 percent of those costs will likely be borne by the federal government. In the end, a key to the low cost rail service future could well be Milwaukee.

Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist has long advocated for increased rail service as an alternative to growing the freeway system. But Milwaukee might be called upon to reduce or elimi-

nate its proposed \$91.5 million electric bus system in order to help pay for the extension.

It might mean some sacrifice but this should be a no-brainer. Economic development experts have been calling this rail connection the key to accelerating the economy throughout southeastern Wisconsin. Anybody who ever had the chance to travel the rail system in its heyday instinctively knows this to be a valid deduction.

Leaders from Milwaukee, Racine and Kenosha are planning to gather to consider the options. They should probably include leaders from Waukesha and West Bend as well for they will also be impacted by the extension of such service, which could be in place as early as 2007.

With rising gasoline costs and innovations in train travel, the time has come once again when this method of transportation makes a lot of sense.