

A good rail compromise

Earmarking \$91.5 million in unused federal money to extend Chicago's Metra commuter trains from Kenosha to downtown Milwaukee wasn't the first choice of some local officials, who nonetheless supported the idea at a regional summit meeting on Monday. It's a reasonable compromise. The proposed Metra extension is bound to improve the region's transportation network and enhance economic development. What's more, the compromise ensures that the federal money will stay here.

Like Mayor John Norquist, we would rather have seen the federal money used to help pay for the \$300 million Milwaukee Connector — the guided electric bus system that was previously scheduled to get the dollars. But opposition, principally from County Executive Scott Walker, has stalled that proposal. Rather than obsess over the stalemate, Norquist decided to search for an alternative. That makes sense given that the \$91.5 million has gone unused for a dozen years and that city officials and congressional representatives already have beaten back one attempt by the feds to reclaim the money.

The compromise worked out among Norquist, Walker and elected officials in Racine and Kenosha counties doesn't guarantee that the commuter rail extension will

be completed; it does keep the concept alive for further study, including preliminary engineering work.

Supporters expect that the Metra trains, which will stop at Racine and a number of southern Milwaukee suburbs before heading to Milwaukee's downtown Amtrak depot, will enhance business commuting and stimulate development around the stations. The trains would use existing freight rail tracks. Shuttle buses would take Metra passengers from the station in Cudahy to nearby Mitchell International Airport — a fine example of integrating transportation modes.

Because a Metra trip from Milwaukee to Chicago would take 2½ hours, the trains aren't expected to steal business from Amtrak's 1½-hour Milwaukee-Chicago run. The officials at the summit also supported having the state Department of Transportation run the line, as proposed by a South-eastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission study committee. Other details need to be worked out, including state and federal approval of the agreement to use the money for extending Metra. But we hope this goes forward because there almost certainly is a demand for the service.