

Give commuter rail a look

True visionaries resist the temptation to see only what's in front of them and force themselves instead to squint hard and try to peer into the future. Advocates of commuter rail have been doing exactly that. They realize that in the near future, people in densely populated areas will likely need to rely on both roads and rail to get around efficiently.

As a result, they're wisely advocating an extension of Chicago's Metra commuter trains from Kenosha to Racine and Milwaukee. Fortunately, the idea was supported last month by an advisory committee of the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.

Specifically, the SEWRPC panel recommended a medium-level commuter rail service at a cost of \$152.1 million. The feds would pay for 80% of construction costs and about \$5 million of the annual \$15.4 million in net operating costs. The state would pay for \$10.4 million in operating expenses. Fares would contribute another 15% to 17% in revenue.

The service would provide about 4,100 weekday rides each week or about 1.1 million trips a year from Kenosha to Milwaukee with stops in Cudahy, South Milwaukee, Oak Creek, the Town of Caledonia and the Town of Somers. (Commuter rail relies on full-size trains running on existing freight rail tracks between a major city and its distant suburbs.)

Many rail cynics routinely argue that no matter what form it takes, rail will never work here. They need a remedial history

course. It wasn't all that long ago when commuter rail played a big role in interurban transportation in southeastern Wisconsin. But we also understand, as a recent poll by the National Association of Realtors confirmed, that in order to attract riders, modern commuter rail must be convenient, safe and accessible.

One of the continuing myths about rail is that the people who embrace it are free-spending dreamers. Not true. Among the many companies solidly behind this project are S.C. Johnson & Son Inc., Miller Brewing Co., We Energies, CNH Global and Super Steel Corp. What they and area business organizations — including the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, the Greater Milwaukee Association of Realtors and the Racine Area Manufacturers and Commerce, realize is that commuter rail will stimulate economic development by making it easier for workers to get to their jobs and for visitors and other patrons to get to their destinations.

The advisory committee suggests the state take a lead role in this endeavor. That's appropriate since this state spends only \$15 per resident on transit for every \$100 spent on highways, far less than Illinois. But there is a hitch — money; the state doesn't have nearly enough right now, for transportation or anything else. But state officials must not use that as an excuse to crawl into a fiscal bunker and forget about the future. Being a visionary, after all, also means thinking boldly.