

OUR PERSPECTIVE

Keep churning ahead on commuter rail plan

The proposal to extend commuter rail service to link Chicago, Racine and Milwaukee took an important step last week when it won the formal endorsement of an advisory panel of elected officials, businesspeople and municipal government staff.

But the very next day Governor-elect Jim Doyle, who was in town to solicit ideas for cutting the state's expenditures and trying to balance a budget weighted heavily with a \$2.6 billion deficit, was a little less receptive to the notion of state help.

"Let's just be very practical right now," said Doyle. "In the next four or five months I've got to balance a budget and there is not a lot of money around for these sorts of things."

We commiserate with the governor-elect and his attempts to deal with the state's budget woes.

And we appreciate his lip service to the rail link — calling it "very important" and saying the state should plan for it.

We would submit as well that an extended commuter rail line running up the lakeshore from Chicago to Milwaukee is vital to the long-term economic interests of our region; that extending service will not grow cheaper over time; and that — America's longstanding love affair with the automobile notwithstanding — southeastern Wisconsin and the Chicago area are in dire need of a more balanced transportation system.

Wisconsin's Interstate highway corridor here has grown busier and busier in the past decade and is only a step or two behind the jammed highways and ever-extended drive times in the Chicago area. That pressure on our transportation systems will not abate in the years ahead and we need to move ahead now to deal with it.

The proposal advanced by the advisory panel last week is not the high-end model. It calls for extending the Metra run north from

Kenosha with seven trains per day in each direction. The cost to establish service is estimated at \$152 million with operating costs of about \$18.6 million per year.

The proposal now goes to public hearing in February and must also be approved by municipal and county governments.

Many of those dollars — up to 80 percent — are expected to come from the federal government, which would also subsidize about a third of the annual operating costs. Fares would pay for perhaps 15 to 17 percent of the operating costs, according to the report.

That still leaves some financial gaps — including just how much the state would be willing (and able) to add to the pot. Those issues will no doubt take considerable discussion.

And while the state is grappling with a deficit right now, the planning for commuter rail extension will take time and actual service would not commence for four to seven years so the planning and public approval process should move ahead at a steady pace.

The price tag is not a small one, to be sure, but when we look at that we should put it in perspective by looking at costs of alternatives.

Widening or expanding our interstate system would be one such option — and that is not cheap either. Milwaukee is currently struggling with a deteriorating Marquette interchange, the crossroads at the heart of the city, and the price tag for rebuilding that is estimated at \$1.5 billion — a cost ten times that of extending commuter rail.

A balanced transportation system with commuter rail would give southeastern Wisconsin residents better transit options, enhance opportunities for business within the metro areas and would in time likely extend to link Madison and Green Bay as well.