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## Will wider I-94 squash rail?

### As freeway project nears, officials disagree on its impact on mass transit plans

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State plans to add new lanes to I-94 in a 35-mile stretch from the Illinois border to Milwaukee's south side are in line for federal approval this week, and a construction start within a year.

That perceived fast track has frustrated expansion opponents, including Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, who recently attacked the project as an expensive roadblock to needed mass transit improvements in southeast Wisconsin.

An exchange between Barrett and state Department of Transportation Secretary Frank Busalacchi makes the federal review of the I-94 proposal another forum for the seemingly unresolvable stalemate over transit initiatives and how to pay for them.

The transportation plans for expanding I-94 from three to four lanes in both directions also call for bus and rail service to be doubled in the same area in the same time frame.

But in a letter to the I-94 project manager, Barrett accused the DOT of following only the road-building recommendation.

"The I-94 project represents yet another example of the State DOT's failure to invest in mass transit

alternatives at a level on par with its commitment to freeway spending," Barrett wrote in a letter also signed by Aldermen Willie Hines, Michael Murphy and Robert Bauman.

Their figures put the amount spent by the DOT on highways at \$19.2 billion from 1992-2007 vs. \$2.2 billion spent on mass transit.

For fiscal year 2008, the DOT estimates \$1.15 billion allocated primarily for roadway construction and rehabilitation, compared with roughly \$165 million allocated for the operating costs of mass transit run by local municipalities and Amtrak.

That spending is authorized by the Legislature.

The city leaders who object to the expanded I-94 support the DOT plan to rebuild the freeway, at a cost of \$1.7 billion. The reconstruction with the added lanes is projected to cost \$1.9 billion. Barrett and the aldermen asked Busalacchi to scrap the expansion and use the \$200 million to fund mass transit alternatives and increased local road aid.

Conveniently, the price tag for the stalled Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee rail connector line is the same: \$200 million. Other freeway expansion opponents also have called for the state to scale back the I-94 plan and spend the money on building the KRM.

## **Not that simple**

While it appears simple, it's a flawed assessment, according to Busalacchi and transportation planners in the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.

That \$200 million doesn't exist in a pot of money to be spent as the DOT chooses. If the Federal Highway Administration approves the I-94 project, it would most likely be part of the federal allocation for the road construction, not mass transit operations.

And Busalacchi, in a response to Barrett, said the city and county and not his department are responsible for the mass transit improvements needed to meet the planning goals for 2035.

"What is lacking is local and regional consensus and commitment to actually develop and implement these services, all of which are local responsibilities," Busalacchi wrote.

The debate over the I-94 plan has pitted mass transit vs. road construction as a one-or-the-other choice.

Busalacchi said that's wrong. Even if the miles traveled by transit users doubled in the region by 2035, the future traffic on I-94 warrants the expanded roadway, he said, citing SEWRPC reports.

Opponents disagree and have used the Transportation Department's own planning documents to challenge that contention.

According to the Final Environmental Impact statement, there would be very little difference in travel times in Racine and Kenosha counties whether lanes are added or the road is rebuilt with its current six lanes.

In the one-month comment period that ended May 5, statements in opposition to the expansion outnumbered those in favor by nearly 3 to 1, based on a review of those submitted in writing and via telephone.

Those comments will be weighed in the decision about to be made by the Federal Highway Administration, which has the final approval authority.

Trades groups, including carpenters and operating engineers, support the plans to add new lanes. The Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce and the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin also submitted letters touting the benefits of an expanded I-94.

If the federal agency approves the project and allocates the money, construction would start in the Mitchell Interchange in 2009. The main traffic lanes would be rebuilt, starting in Kenosha County, and the road work and interchange reconstruction would be completed in 2016.

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