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High-speed rail is back on track

Milwaukee-Madison passenger line gets budget boost

The Business Journal of Milwaukee - by Rich Kirchen

The long discussed concept of high-speed passenger rail between Milwaukee and Madison has taken two major financial steps closer to reality.

The new state budget, signed Oct. 26 by Gov. Jim Doyle, includes \$32 million in bonding authority toward track upgrades and new railroad cars for the route. That financing will be added to \$48 million Doyle and the state Legislature previously approved for extending the **Amtrak** Hiawatha line to Madison.

The state bonding would cover 20 percent of the estimated \$400 million cost, and will remain unused unless the federal government delivers the remaining 80 percent. To that end, the U.S. Senate on Oct. 30 passed the Amtrak authorization bill, which includes grants to states for capital projects such as the proposed Milwaukee-Madison service.

One remaining hurdle for the Amtrak bill is the U.S. House of Representatives, which is scheduled to consider it in January 2008.

If the bill, which includes \$1.4 billion in funding, is passed and signed by President George W. Bush, Wisconsin would have to apply for a \$320 million grant for the project. Other states also would likely request grants.

Launching the Milwaukee-Madison route is a high priority for Doyle and state Department of Transportation Secretary Frank Busalacchi. Busalacchi testified before Congress earlier this year to urge the federal match for such projects. Busalacchi chairs the States for **Passenger Rail Coalition**, which promotes intercity passenger rail services.

Busalacchi said in an interview this week that demand for passenger rail is rising because of higher gas prices and public concern about global warming and energy independence. He said the existing Hiawatha line between Milwaukee and Chicago has been carrying standing-room crowds and recently added a fifth car.

"The appetite for this is out there, but we have to increase the capacity," Busalacchi said.

Rail support

The state DOT has supported Milwaukee-Madison passenger service since 1993. Former Gov. Tommy Thompson, who was then co-chair of the Amtrak board, formed a commission in 1999

to explore high-speed rail service in Wisconsin, but the proposal languished after he left the state to join the Bush administration in 2001.

The current proposal calls for the trains to run on existing CP Railway tracks at speeds ranging from 20 to 110 miles per hour. The trip would take about 66 minutes compared with 78 minutes by automobile, according to the DOT. The Milwaukee-Chicago route, which now takes 89 minutes, would speed up to 64 minutes.

The operating costs would be covered by passenger fares of \$20 to \$33 each way, according to the DOT.

The train would stop in Brookfield, Oconomowoc, Watertown and Madison. Local communities would be expected to design and construct their own stations. Currently, the closest the Amtrak comes to Madison is Columbus on the Empire Builder line.

The Milwaukee-Madison train initially would run six times a day and later increase to 10 round trips. The longer-term plan calls for extending the high-speed service to Minneapolis.

The DOT estimates annual ridership would be 872,000, with about a fourth of those trips taken for business purposes.

The state already has spent \$7 million acquiring right-of-way between Watertown and Madison for the new route, said Randy Wade, DOT passenger rail manager.

Also in preparation for the new service, the state DOT received in June 2004 a "finding of no significant impact" on the environment from the Federal Railroad Administration, Wade said.

If federal funds become available and Wisconsin gets those funds, the Milwaukee-Madison line could be up and running in three years, Busalacchi said.

Low priority

The **Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce** supports the high-speed rail proposal in the context of strengthening economic links between the two cities, said lobbyist Steve Baas. However, Baas said the project "is pretty low on our priority list."

John Parkyn of Stoddard, who is president of the pro-rail **Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers**, said the high-speed rail proposal slowed down after Thompson left the governor's office. But now, with the backing of Busalacchi and Doyle, the additional bonding in the state budget is reviving hopes for a return to passenger service between Milwaukee and Madison that died decades ago.

"It's a significant thing," Parkyn said.

U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl (D-Wis.), who was a co-sponsor of the Amtrak authorization bill, said the funding provides states with the "flexibility to make real investments in passenger rail" such as the initiatives in Wisconsin.

"It's a wise investment of federal dollars to encourage these projects that promote an efficient

transportation infrastructure, reduce traffic congestion and contribute to local economic growth," Kohl said.

This summer, the Hiawatha service posted double-digit percent increases in ridership, Busalacchi said.

In June, July and August, Amtrak averaged more than 1,320 passengers per day for the corridor. The line offers seven daily round trips.

A high-speed rail extension of Amtrak's Hiawatha service to Madison would demonstrate the potential of state-of-the-art passenger rail service, Busalacchi said.

Doyle's economic development plan, Grow Wisconsin, calls for the state to invest in passenger rail -- and all modes of transportation -- to support economic growth.

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