

Jefferson County on track to join River Rail Transit Commission

By Lydia Statz, Daily Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, January 16, 2014 9:04 am

JEFFERSON — Jefferson County will become the ninth county to join the Wisconsin River Rail Transit Commission, after voting Tuesday to take an active part in improving freight rail lines in southern Wisconsin.

The WRRTC was formed in 1980 after the Milwaukee Road rail line between Madison and Prairie du Chien filed for bankruptcy. Fearing the tracks would become abandoned, the state created the idea of “rail commissions” to promote and improve freight rail infrastructure throughout the state.

“What they do is basically manage state-owned railroad track in southern Wisconsin,” explained WRRTC administrator Mary Penn. “The state owns it, but the state chooses not to manage it actively. So in order to get more local input, the counties have these appointed commissioners, and the counties contribute funds to support this commission.”

Though the state Department of Transportation owns the rail corridors, it is up to the rail transit commissions to invest local money in maintaining and improving the tracks. The WRRTC, one of several in the state, is comprised of nine counties through which the track passes, including Crawford, Dane, Grant, Iowa, Rock, Sauk, Walworth, Waukesha and now Jefferson counties.

Then, the publicly owned and funded track is leased to a private company for the right to operate a freight rail system. Today, the track in the WRRTC network is operated exclusively by the Wisconsin & Southern Railroad, which ships items such as military vehicles, grain, plastics and canned goods over the network.

The commission works in conjunction with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and Wisconsin & Southern Railroad to invest in improvements along the track, expand service lines and promote the use of freight rail throughout the area.

Penn said attempting to upgrade and maintain the rail lines in southern Wisconsin is a constant challenge, but several major projects have significantly improved service in the area. In Walworth County, the commission completed a project to replace the conventional track with a continuous welded rail, which allows trains to gather greater speed and maintain greater control. Currently, the commission also is working on building a passing track in Rock County to allow trains to run in two directions.

“They’re always doing bridge replacement. They’re always trying to get the whole system upgraded, because in a lot of places on this system, it’s over 100 years old,” she said.

“Fortunately, it’s built to last, but 100 years of rail use can kind of knock the socks off a system.”

Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier said the county was approached by several companies in the county concerning ways to improve the rail lines.

“There are several companies, specifically in the northern part of the county, that started contacting local supervisors and our representatives at the economic development consortium, and were asking ... ‘can we maybe have a place at the table, for lack of a better term, for helping to improve some of the infrastructure, specifically on the Watertown to Madison rail?’” he said.

That line, operated by the Wisconsin & Southern Railroad Co., runs from Madison through Waterloo to Watertown. In many places along the corridor, trains can travel at a top speed of 10 miles per hour, limiting the capabilities of larger companies located along the line for moving bulk cargo.

“We’re hoping to work with the railroads and the Department of Transportation in promoting this as being one of the priorities to get done, so it moves up to the Class II status, which improves the weight capacity and speed of rail service that can be provided to those companies and future companies in that area,” said Wehmeier.

In addition, the Wisconsin & Southern Railroad serves the Village of Palmyra on a line that runs from Monroe to Waukesha.

Although all three communities currently served by the commission lie around the edge of the county, Wehmeier said, now that Jefferson County is involved with the WRRTC, there is a possibility for expansion into the central part of the county in the future.

“Recently, the Department of Transportation, with the commission, bought a Union Pacific line service basically from Madison up to Reedsburg. So there’s always that discussion about what can we do to improve access on that line that runs from Watertown down to Fort Atkinson,” he said.

That line currently is owned by the Union Pacific Railroad.

“There are no guarantees that would ever happen, but this opens the dialogue a little bit more in terms of how can we better create the conditions that allow for greater freight traffic potentially and allow for greater economic development growth,” Penn said.

Membership in the commission comes at a cost of \$28,000 per county annually. Penn said that contribution helps finance improvement projects along the rail corridor, covers administrative costs, and brings valuable member benefits.

“All the counties that are members of the commission have active rail in their counties. Freight rail translates to economic development ... So any county that has a foot in the door with the commission, they’re going to have a much more close-up and in-the-action knowledge with what’s going on in freight rail, and then you can bring that information back to your county boards and your economic development corporations and you’re going to be more informed about those issues,” said Penn.

For 2014, the Jefferson County Economic Development Consortium will pay half of the county’s contribution, with the other \$14,000 coming from the county’s 2014 budget.

All member counties of the commission appoint three commissioners to serve on the board. Wehmeier soon will select three county residents, including at least one who also serves on the JCEDC board, to staggered, three-year terms.

The WRRTC meets monthly at open, public meetings, usually on the Friday after the first Tuesday of each month at the Dane County Highway Building in Madison.

Penn said the addition of a ninth county to the commission will provide not only more capital leadership depth for the entire rail network to work with, but also economic benefits for Jefferson County,

“They had active rail in their county, but because they weren’t on the commission, they didn’t have an ear to the commission and what’s moving on that track and how much,” she said. “So this puts them at the table, and they’re part of the dialogue now.”