

Grant to upgrade freight line

By Chris Welch Union staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, October 15, 2014 10:06 am

JEFFERSON — Jefferson County Board of Supervisors Chairperson Jim Schroeder announced Tuesday that the Wisconsin River Rail Transit Commission (WRRTC) will provide about \$5 million to upgrade the freight railroad lines between Watertown and Dane County.

Schroeder said the work to improve the rails will begin sometime next spring.

The WRRTC was created by Crawford, Dane, Grant, Iowa, Rock, Sauk, Walworth and Waukesha counties — with Jefferson joining the agency in January— for the purpose of continuing rail service and maintaining rail lines that pass through those counties. 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 “rail commissions” to promote and improve freight rail infrastructure throughout the state.

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.

Although the state Department of Transportation (DOT) owns the rail corridors, it is up to the various regional rail transit commissions to invest local money in maintaining and improving the tracks. The WRRTC owns the tracks, but they are operated through the Wisconsin & Southern Railroad Company.

Membership in the commission costs \$28,000 per county annually.

The Jefferson County Economic Development Consortium paid half of the county’s contribution earlier this year; the other \$14,000 came from the county’s 2014 budget.

The announcement of the rail improvements in Jefferson County, technically, was made by County Administrator Ben Wehmeier as part of his 2015 county budget presentation during the board of supervisors meeting Tuesday. However, Wehmeier did not elaborate on it much, as he focused on many other details in his presentation, such as changes in the Health Department and long-term budget planning.

However, Schroeder spoke with reporters after the supervisors’ meeting concluded Tuesday.

“About a year ago, I was serving on the Jefferson County Economic Consortium, and a representative of Clasen Quality Coating in Watertown came to a meeting asking if we could improve the rail service to help them bring sugar in and finished products out,” Schroeder said.

Clasen is a manufacturer of confectionery coatings, chocolate, and fillings for a variety of snack foods, baked goods, pastries and ice cream.

“The existing track is limited to five miles per hour,” Schroeder continued. “At that point, I started advocating for us to join the WRRTC, which was something I had been thinking about for some time. We were the only one of the contiguous counties that was not a member of the commission. If you do not have a seat at the table, nothing is going to happen.”

He said that “over the spirited objection of the then-county board chair, I built support for it in the consortium and then with the board, which approved the \$28,000-per-year investment, and last week, that investment paid off to the tune of over of \$5 million in track improvements between Madison and Watertown.”

Schroeder said that will allow the maximum speed to increase to 25 miles per hour.

“Now that might not seem like much, but it is huge for the economic development of Jefferson County,” he said. “This illustrates, again, that if you do not have a seat at the table, then you are not going to get the resources.”

Schroeder said the \$5 million amount is a combination of state and federal grants, but the grants are allocated through the WRRTC.

Supervisors Augie Tietz and Laura Payne, along with former Waterloo City Clerk Mo Hansen, serve as Jefferson County’s representatives on the WRRTC.

“Our county administrator, Ben, was in contact with the governor’s office, which was also involved on the decision for this funding,” Schroeder said. “We had Kim Erdmann of the Watertown Economic Development Organization advocating for us as well, along with other interested businesses, primarily in the Watertown area.”