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## County quietly does its part to keep trains rolling

Jan 16, 2019

While many of the programs run by county government are highly visible — like the deputy parked in the highway median that you pass on your way to work — many folks are unaware of other programs that we offer.

One line of business that I am confident few county taxpayers know that we are involved in is a railroad. Walworth County has been part of a nine-county consortium called the Wisconsin River Rail Transit Commission since 1983. The commission manages train tracks and other rail assets under an agreement with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation.

I will admit that my knowledge of the organization was less than complete, and to change that, I requested that our board appoint me to serve on the commission. The Wisconsin River Rail Transit Commission has an interesting history. As the demand for rail service declined throughout the U.S. in the 1960s and '70s, many railroads faced insolvency, forcing them to abandon unprofitable routes, merge with competitors or cease operations entirely.

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The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Western Railroad, known as the Milwaukee Road, was no exception. That railroad operated passenger and freight service on thousands of miles of tracks throughout the United States, and was a major operator in Walworth County. Concerned that the abandonment of all of its tracks would have a negative impact on economic development, the state of Wisconsin obtained some of the Milwaukee Road's former routes out of the bankruptcy estate, and encouraged the creation of transit commissions.

These commissions, comprised of consortia of counties, manage and improve the assets under the plan. The commissions, in turn, lease the tracks to a railroad. In the case of the River Rail Transit Commission, the Wisconsin and Southern Railroad has been the exclusive operator on

its tracks since the mid-1990s.

The original River Rail Commission consisted of six counties: Crawford, Dane, Grant, Iowa, Richland and Sauk. As additional tracks became available, typically through abandonment by other operators, new counties joined the consortium. Our county's turn came in 1983 in order to retain service between Fox Lake, Illinois, and Janesville. Those tracks pass through the southern part of Walworth County, between Zenda, in the town of Linn and Bardwell, in the town of Darien.

Jefferson County was the last member to join the commission, which occurred two years ago. In addition to the Fox Lake route, two additional tracks managed by the commission impact our county. One line passes through Whitewater on its way from Milton to Waukesha. Another line connects Elkhorn to Bardwell.

Governance of the River Rail Transit Commission is straightforward enough. Each county appoints three commissioners and makes an annual contribution to underwrite administrative costs and to pay for improvements on the line. Each of the participating counties will contribute \$30,000 to the commission in 2019.

While I have always read the meeting minutes of the commission, preparing for and attending the meetings has given me a greater understanding of the challenges faced by the organization and the opportunities that it provides. Three significant challenges include:

**Aging infrastructure.** Assets inherited by the commission in the 1980s were in poor shape. The commission has made slow but steady progress over the years to rebuild critical infrastructure, including bridges and culverts. An ongoing capital project involves replacing old jointed railroad track with heavier track that is actually welded together. The continuous welded rail requires less maintenance, and permits heavier trains to travel over them at higher speeds.

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**Access to Chicago.** The Wisconsin and Southern Railroad is a short-line railroad, meaning that products leaving our state often need to be delivered to one of the seven national Class 1 railroads. Chicago is an important rail hub, but unfortunately our commission only owns track to Fox Lake, Illinois. Our operator must obtain permission from the Chicago metropolitan commuter railroad, METRA, to use its track for runs in and out of the city during overnight hours. Those trips had been limited to 14 per week until earlier this year when the Wisconsin and Southern Railroad invested in a new 8,000-foot siding in Belden, Illinois. At a cost of \$2 million, the siding permits the railroad to queue trains closer to the METRA tracks and make five additional trips into Chicago each week.

**Flooding.** Record rains this summer destroyed a significant amount of the commission's infrastructure, particularly in areas north of Madison. The Wisconsin and Southern Railroad restored service relatively quickly, and used the opportunity to improve the ability of the line to better withstand heavy rain events in the future.

The Wisconsin River Rail Transit Commission is a work in progress. While improvements to the line are being made each year, a fair amount of work remains to be done. On balance, however, I think our \$30,000 annual appropriation makes sense. Trains can reduce the number of heavy trucks on our highways, provide our farmers with an economical way to transport crops to market, and provide an amenity to attract businesses to locate and expand in Walworth County.

*David Bretl is the county administrator for Walworth County. The opinions expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Walworth County Board of Supervisors.*

