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FOR INFORMATION CALL

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Dane County Airport Rail Stop "A Mistake," Alderman Says

Now that it is a virtual certainty that intercity passenger train service will be returning to the Milwaukee-Madison corridor thanks to the leadership of Governor Doyle and the Obama Administration's award of \$823 million for construction of this line, Milwaukee **Alderman Robert J. Bauman** said it is time to address the proposed location of the Madison train terminal.

The current plan provides that the Madison terminal for this new service will be at the Dane County Regional Airport -- miles from the Capitol and downtown Madison. Alderman Bauman said the airport location is "a mistake" that must be corrected if the new service is going to succeed.

"It is well established that one of the principal challenges of successful intercity rail passenger service is addressing the problem of the 'last mile,' namely the ability of rail service to provide a connection between the train terminal and a traveler's final destination," Alderman Bauman said.

"Where the last mile can be covered by a short walk, short taxi ride or a short trip on local transit, rail service will be successful. The success of the existing Hiawatha service between Milwaukee and Chicago is a perfect example of this principle," he said.

Alderman Bauman said the downtown location of Chicago's Union Station makes Hiawatha service very attractive because a rail traveler can access all of downtown Chicago and surrounding neighborhoods, such as Michigan Avenue ("the Magnificent Mile") and the Museum Campus (Field Museum, Shedd Aquarium & Soldier Field) by walking, a short taxi ride or a short transit trip. In fact, the entire Chicago metropolitan area is accessible from Union Station because Chicago's commuter rail and rapid transit lines all converge in downtown.

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Dane Airport Stop/ADD ONE

“It is this connectivity that has enabled Chicago to maintain the most robust intercity passenger rail service outside of the Northeast U.S. corridor and why Chicago will be the hub of the proposed Midwest Regional Rail System,” the alderman said.

To a lesser extent, the same is true for Milwaukee’s Intermodal Station, Alderman Bauman said.

Downtown Milwaukee is presently accessible by walking or by a short taxi ride. Milwaukee is currently planning a Downtown Streetcar Circulator which will greatly enhance the connections between the Intermodal Station and downtown Milwaukee and surrounding neighborhoods. “Again, connectivity is the key to successful intercity rail passenger service,” he said.

The principle of connectivity is universally applied in Europe where every major city is served by a downtown rail passenger terminal that provides connections via foot, taxi and other transit service to multiple final destinations, he said.

The official rationale for the Dane County Regional Airport location is that it will save travel time on the eventual high speed passenger rail line to the Twin Cities. Alderman Bauman said there are several problems with this rationale.

“First, it assumes that high speed passenger rail service will in fact be built between Madison and the Twin Cities. In the short run (the next 10 to 15 years) this assumption is questionable,” he said.

The alderman said years of planning will be required to accomplish this service extension. “A route has not yet been selected and when it is, this service extension will require an investment several times larger than the \$823 million allocated to the Milwaukee-Madison corridor,” he said.

“Under a ‘best case scenario’ (planning proceeds with no major technical or political delays and billions of federal funds are made available to finance the project despite the current political environment), I believe it will take a minimum of 10 years to implement such service,” he said.

A more likely scenario, Alderman Bauman said, is that the current federal appropriation for high speed rail represents an opportunity which Congress will not duplicate in the near future until at least some of the corridors funded by the \$8 billion appropriation contained in the federal stimulus bill are up and running and the public can assess their costs and benefits. “Under this scenario, high speed rail to the Twin Cities is 15 to 20 years in the future, at best,” he said.

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Dane Airport Stop/ADD TWO

“Therefore,” according to Alderman Bauman, “it will be 10 to 20 years” before high speed rail service is extended beyond the Dane County Regional Airport. “Given this reality, it makes more sense to build a downtown Madison station now, and when, and if, high speed service is extended to the Twin Cities, Madison area station locations can be adjusted if that is deemed necessary at that time,” he said.

Second, even if high speed rail service is extended to the Twin Cities, a downtown Madison terminal will not significantly diminish the quality of that service, Alderman Bauman said. The argument is that travel time to the Twin Cities will be lengthened because trains will have to go into downtown Madison, change ends (the train engineer would have to transfer from one end of the train to the other) and proceed back out toward the Twin Cities. This maneuver would involve some additional travel time for a Chicago-Twin Cities trip that would take somewhere between five and six hours overall. However, given the huge benefit of a downtown terminal location (the “last mile” issue), this additional travel time is well worth the trade-off.

“On this point, we can again learn from our European friends,” said Alderman Bauman, who recently returned from a trip to Italy where he rode the Italian high speed trains between Rome and Florence.

Alderman Bauman said Rome and Florence are intermediate stops on the Naples-to-Milan high speed line (186 mph service). At both Rome and Florence, the high speed trains travel into the historic downtown stub end stations, the engineer changes ends, and the train proceeds back out to rejoin the high speed right-of-way. In both cases, travel time is added to the overall Naples to Milan trip versus a station stop on the high speed right-of-way on the outskirts of Rome and Florence. “The Italian rail planners realize that one of the principal benefits of this rail service is that it serves downtown Florence and Rome, and a stop on the outskirts of town would defeat the whole purpose of the high speed service -- service to the city centers of the major Italian cities on the line,” he said.

In short, Alderman Bauman said the Dane County Regional Airport plan is flawed. “This station location will diminish ridership on the line and will jeopardize the success of the service. Travelers whose final destination is downtown Madison, surrounding neighborhoods or the University of Wisconsin will simply continue to drive or take existing inter-city buses because the “last mile” must be covered by a long taxi ride or a transfer to local transit,” he said.

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Dane Airport Stop/ADD THREE

For example, he said the fastest local transit connection between the State Capitol and the airport takes 30 minutes (not including wait time) and requires a transfer between bus routes.

“Even if Dane County builds some type of commuter rail/light rail service connecting downtown Madison and the airport there will still be a transfer and a relatively long trip on this mode. As for walking, this option would be completely out of the question unless the traveler is actually going to the airport,” he said.

Alderman Bauman said advocates of transportation choice and sustainable transportation infrastructure have been waiting decades for a high speed rail connection between Wisconsin’s two largest cities, and “it is exciting that this connection will now be built.”

“However, the Dane County Regional Airport rail terminal will jeopardize the success of this connection and in so doing, diminish the chances for future extensions to the Twin Cities, the Fox River Valley and Green Bay,” he said.

“We are at the dawn of a new era in intercity transportation in Wisconsin, but there are many skeptics who will exploit any evidence that this new service has failed to achieve its predicted ridership or produce the predicted public benefits,” Alderman Bauman said.

“This has to be done right because the future of high speed rail in Wisconsin will hinge on the performance of this new corridor,” he said.