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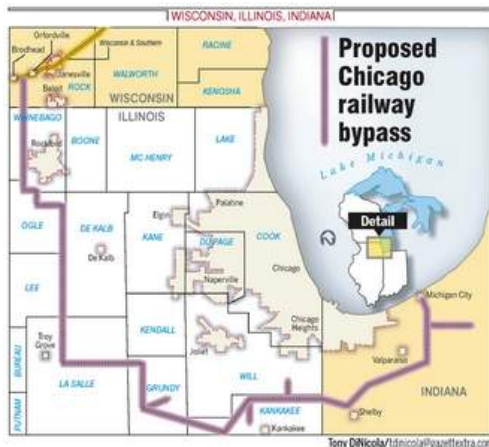
Proposed Chicago freight rail bypass would tie into Rock County



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GINA DUWE
 Sunday, February 8, 2015



A privately-funded plan to build a \$6 billion freight railroad to bypass congestion in Chicago is proposed to tie into tracks between Orfordville and Brodhead to complete a connection to the Port of Milwaukee.

If the 275-mile project

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becomes reality, it would mark the largest rail construction project in the United States in more than 100 years, and it would be privately funded, said Frank Patton, who is leading the project as managing partner of Great Lakes Basin.

“We’ve talked to enough people that we feel very comfortable” in the project becoming reality, said Patton, who lives on the Indiana-Illinois border.

“It’s a humongous project—very ambitions,” said David Simon, chief of the Railroads and Harbors Section for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. “We’re not

sure what to think of it just because it’s so large. We’re talking billions of dollars.”

But Simon said he wouldn’t go as far as using the word “pipedream,” if Patton “has the financial backing that he says he has, and if he has the buy-in with the proposed customer base with the railroads that he says he has.”

“I’d say it will be difficult ... I wouldn’t rule it out completely,” he said.

Congestion around the Chicago freight rail hub, the largest in the world, is well documented. Trains take 30 hours or more to get across the city. The hub is forecast to grow by 80 percent by 2040, Patton said, and the new rail line would move freight through in eight hours.

THE IDEA

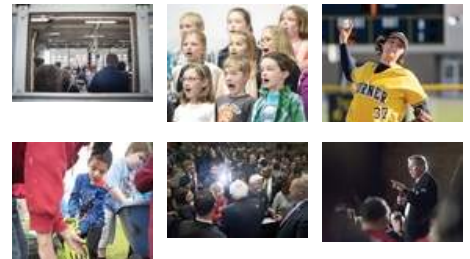
The Great Lakes Basin Railroad would start west of Janesville, between Orfordville and Brodhead. The new track would connect to the state-owned track that Wisconsin & Southern operates on. That connection would offer access through Janesville and Milton up to Waukesha and the Port of Milwaukee.

From its start in Rock County, the new railroad would go around the west side of Rockford, Illinois, then head southeast into

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Indiana, ending in Michigan City, Indiana, along the shores of Lake Michigan.

If it seems like Orfordville is in the middle of nowhere to start such a massive project, that's exactly the reason, Patton said. They don't want the railroad going through any population centers.

Its design is one of the reasons it is so expensive. Great Lakes Basin Railroad is proposing:

-- Flyovers, which are railroad bridges where two railroads intersect, so trains don't have to wait when they meet at a crossroads.

"That's probably the biggest problem in Chicago--all the railroads that cross," Patton said. "We're going to have 100 percent flyovers."

-- Grade separation, which would allow the railroad to go over highways or county roads when they meet, or vice versa.

The railroad would connect with all six Class 1 railroads, which doesn't happen anywhere else in North America, Patton said. Those connections include two in Wisconsin with Union Pacific in Sussex and Waukesha.

Union Pacific, however, in a statement from spokeswoman Calli Hite said the company is focused on other projects.

"After carefully reviewing the proposal, Union Pacific determined in July 2014 that it was not interested in moving forward with a discussion on the Great Lakes Basin Belt Railroad's bypass project," she wrote. "Union Pacific is focused on several major public-private partnerships, including CREATE and the Union Pacific Metra West Line third main line project, which will benefit the region and enhance efficiency for Chicago-area and regional railroad operations."

People have talked about a Chicago rail bypass for 100 years, Patton said, but the timing was never right.

"But the timing's right now, and the quality of what we're talking about as far as flyovers and grade separation and quality of track—everything's first class, brand new. A project like this couldn't

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be built in any other part of the country because the traffic is not there to support it, but here it is,” he said.

The concept is on target, Simon said, but “pulling it off is going to be quite a challenge.”

Patton said they've talked to a test market of landowners about their compensation model.

“The reception was 100 percent,” he said, including all positive reactions from farmers. “It's because they're going to make a lot of money.”

Land acquisition wouldn't start until after the design gets federal approval, he said. The project would be seeking 150-foot rights-of-way, and the investors would not be looking to buy farms, he said.

THE TIMELINE

The project is in the hands of AECOM, an international engineering design company, to ready a proposal for the Surface Transportation Board, a federal agency that has jurisdiction over railroads. The board must approve the design plans for the project, and Patton said he hopes to meet with the board in the next month.

If the design is approved, the next step is an environmental impact study. The plan is to split that study into five sections so if there's a problem in one section, it doesn't hold up the whole network, Patton said.

If the project gains approval, he said he hopes to start construction next year.

Work on the Wisconsin leg of the track could start at the same time as the rest of the project, or even earlier, Patton said, because the labor supply is more predictable than in Illinois. A record amount of work is underway on the Illinois Tollway, he said, which could mean construction begins on both ends of the track building toward the middle.

“If we're successful with construction time estimates, then we will start operation in 2018,” he said.

He admits it's a "very aggressive" timeline. He plans to submit a plan to the Surface Transportation Board to speed up the process, and the fact that 2016 is an election year helps them, he said.

"We're talking huge job creation, and everybody—Republican or Democrat—said that's the No. 1 domestic issue," he said.

The plan to not seek any government money also helps, he said.

"I think that's why we've gotten as far as we have," he said. "We're not competing with anybody."

FINANCING

While Patton couldn't reveal details because of non-disclosure agreements, he said, he is one of seven domestic investors so far. They have about two dozen international infrastructure investors who have either been contacted or found out about the railroad, he said.

"We've gotten a lot of interest," he said.

From nearly Day One, Patton said all the financial people his group has talked to said if the permit to build is granted, the \$6 billion wouldn't be a problem.

"I've been told, literally, that if we, once we get the permit to build, that people will be lined up around the block to get a piece of this," he said.

Patton, 71, started and ran Portfolio Dynamics, a software company, for 32 years before selling it in 2002. A near-death experience with a tumor below his brain left him with a new intensity to decide what to do with the rest of his life, he said.

He started volunteering and getting involved in public affairs projects, including the Illiana Corridor, a new highway between Illinois and Indiana. That's when he started kicking around the railroad idea.

THE IMPACT

The rail line would benefit interstate commerce and Wisconsin's economy, Simon said.

"I think you might see revitalization of any community along that

route, including Janesville, all the way up through the Waukesha area,” Simon said.

The proposal could bring redevelopment at the shuttered General Motors plant in Janesville, though Patton said he hates to even mention it because he doesn't know much about the plant.

“A lot of people think one of the problems that plant had was the suppliers had to be right close by because rail access around Chicago is so poor,” he said.

It's become too expensive to inventory parts in almost every industry, so businesses turn to just-in-time delivery, he said. That means a manufacturing plant calls a supplier at 2 p.m. to order parts needed on the dock by 9 a.m. the next day.

“If you don't have good, timely rail access to that supplier, then the only way he can do it is to put it on a truck,” Patton said.

The cheapest way is to put it on rail, he said.

“We're allowing Wisconsin manufacturers not only to ship but to receive goods by rail in a much more efficient, safer ... way than they have before,” he said.

One consideration could be increased train traffic through Rock County, Simon said. He said a lot of fear mongering goes on over the dangers of hazardous materials on rail cars.

The goods transported on the Great Lakes Basin Railroad could be anything that moves on rail, Patton said.

“Anything coming into or out of Wisconsin by rail, it would be on this network,” he said.

Ken Lucht, spokesman for Wisconsin & Southern Railroad, said he didn't know much about the proposal but would be monitoring it. He called the concept “very forward-thinking and very visionary.”

“Rail congestion in Chicago is maddening,” he said. “It's never been worse.”

Rock County Economic Development Manager James Otterstein said it was premature to give the project a thumbs up or down.

Quite a bit data, information and feedback likely need to be gathered “that would be analyzed and certainly there would be a lot of entities involved in those types of decisions,” he said.

Last updated: 9:51 am Sunday, February 8, 2015



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<http://www.midwestenergynews.com/2014/03/27/could-a-bypass-take-bakken-oil-around-chicago/>

One publication brings up the potential that this proposed bypass route could serve to reroute crude oil-by-rail shipments around densely-populated areas in Chicago. The publication says Patton indicated the bypass could serve to instead route crude-by-rail through more rural parts of Illinois en route to and through Wisconsin and Indiana. I wonder how much oil and oil bi-products already rail through southern Wisconsin, and whether crude shipping would in fact be a major use for this proposed bypass.

By NEIL JOHNSON at 11:43 pm Sunday, February 8, 2015 | [Report Abuse](#)



.."rail congestion in Chicago is maddening"

Same thing with driving to/through Chicago....Just one big mess in many, many ways.

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By NEW USER at 9:33 pm Sunday, February 8, 2015 | [Report Abuse](#)



Ummm...a rail line from the shore of Lake Michigan to the shore of Lake Michigan???

Why not just load the stuff at the first point???

By NEW USER at 9:07 pm Sunday, February 8, 2015 | [Report Abuse](#)



Diverting freight traffic from Chicago could help Amtrak, which is frequently delayed by freight trains.

By fschultz at 2:32 pm Sunday, February 8, 2015 | [Report Abuse](#)

 The railway reported a 265% increase of frac sand being transported between 2010 and 2012.

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<http://www.railjournal.com/index.php/freight/risk-and-reward-from-the-us-fracking-boom.html>

By buyusa at 11:40 am Sunday, February 8, 2015 | [Report Abuse](#)

 Are there any "real" plans other than just some lines drawn on a map?

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<http://www.midwestenergynews.com/2014/03/27/could-a-bypass-take-bakken-oil-around-chicago/>

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