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November 20, 2000

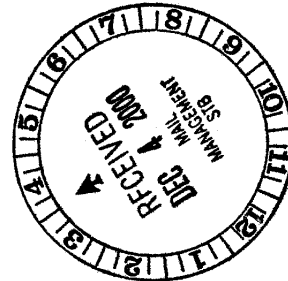
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Office of the Secretary
Case Control Unit
STB Finance Docket No. 33407
Surface Transportation Board
1925 K St., NW
Washington, DC 20423-0001

001647



Attn: Victoria Rutson

As a resident of Rochester, Minnesota, I have three primary personal concerns with the environmental impact of the plan to upgrade the DM&E railroad for transportation of Powder River coal through this town.

The first is noise. I have experienced firsthand the level of noise that high speed rail traffic generates. My father lives 700 meters from the Conrail main line tracks in Chesterton, Indiana. Even with several blocks of houses between his home and the railroad, the level of sound from a passing freight is significant. My house in Rochester is in a similar situation. It is 800 meters from the DM&E tracks also with intervening houses. Even at that distance, the noise will detract from my property values and it appears that there is no effective way to mitigate this problem.

The second concern is commuting safety. I work on the opposite side of the tracks from where I live and I walk, bike, or ride the bus across the tracks at least twice a day. Safety mitigation efforts will undoubtedly decrease the number of grade crossings, resulting in more congestion at the remaining crossings, especially during the commuting hours. I will have to deal with heavier traffic and a greater risk of vehicular accidents even if the risk due to faster and more frequent train traffic is discounted.

My third concern is mitigation costs. The environmental statements on this project have very little to say about the economic burden of mitigation, leaving me with the impression that the DM&E will not do any more than it has to. Therefore the burden of mitigation will fall to the city and the taxpayers, myself included. Even though the railroad has argued against a bypass, they have recognized that mitigation on the present route through Rochester will be expensive, if not impossible.

There are also secondary considerations. While a grade crossing will be blocked for a shorter time by a high speed train than by a slower one, the added traffic funneled through a smaller number of crossings will cause congestion that will lengthen the wait dramatically for most people. This is especially true if traffic backs up through the nearby intersections that have traffic lights, an all too common occurrence even today. The additional traffic through a smaller number of crossings is also likely to result in more crossings in Rochester being designated as "A" category, with a much greater risk of collisions between vehicular traffic and trains.

Although the actual probability of a catastrophic rail accident that necessitates evacuation of the surrounding area is very small, the proximity of facilities such as the Federal Medical Center, St. Mary's Hospital, and Methodist Hospital is of great concern. These institutions have many patients that cannot be moved without a serious threat to their lives.

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In addition to those that simply can't be moved, the patients that could be evacuated from the above institutions, as well as the nursing units at Charter House and Bethany Samaritan Center, would overtax the capabilities of any emergency plan. Also, there are at least seven large retirement homes close enough to the tracks to require evacuation in such an emergency. The cost of a catastrophic accident, when it happens, will be staggering.

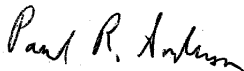
All those problems might be eliminated by a bypass around Rochester, but the environmental impact to the natural surroundings in the rural areas would be great and has been well documented. Building a bypass would simply be pushing the city's problems onto the rural residents. In addition, the taxpayers of Rochester would have to pay the bill for the bypass, and would have to pay again as residents of Olmsted County for the mitigation costs that the bypass would impose.

My final concern is broader. It appears that a third carrier for Powder River coal is not a necessity. Since the DM&E corridor to the Mississippi River is shorter than the current routes, rail shipment to Winona would be cheaper via the DM&E. However, because the customers for the coal have not been identified, the overall shipping cost savings are unknown. Mary Rieder, an economics professor at Winona State University, pointed out during the Surface Transportation Board hearings in Rochester that the addition of a third carrier in the basin might even cause a destructive price war among the three. As the smallest of the competitors, the DM&E might fail. This would leave the agricultural sector that does depend on the railroad without any carrier at all.

In addition, I feel that the mounting global environmental impact of burning coal to produce electricity will force utilities to move away from coal as an energy source. Our own Rochester Public Utilities Silver Lake power plant, which burns coal, has been identified as the worst polluting plant in Minnesota. This is despite the retrofit of pollution control devices at the plant. It is generally assumed in the power industry that the aging coal plants will be retired and that the newer plants will use other fuel sources. It is quite likely that the DM&E is trying to capture yesterday's market. By the time the project is completed, there may be few customers for the coal that is expected to finance the upgrade.

The problems that I have described are only a few of those voiced during the STB hearings in Rochester. My conclusion, after attending those hearings, is that frequent, high speed rail traffic through Rochester will place a serious burden on everyone in the city, and for those closest, an unacceptable burden. Building a bypass simply throws the problems over the fence into the backyards of the rural residents without reducing the overall economic impact of the project on the city and county. Coal transportation by the DM&E may appear to be a cheaper alternative than the present rail connections for the utilities burning coal, but it is not a necessity. The option that I support is that the Surface Transportation Board should reject the proposed expansion project.

Sincerely,



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