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Proposals on the Expansion of Public Transportation

By James Alessia

Introduction

The following is a paper on past and current proposals to expand public transportation in Milwaukee and the surrounding area through transport options such as commuter rail and high-speed rail. Commuter rail primarily operates between metropolitan areas and suburbs/cities along the line, with increased service during rush hour and reduced service at all other times. High speed rail is rail services that reach speeds of 110mph or more. It is organized by the following: general history on public transportation in Milwaukee, failed and past proposals on public transportation, current proposal on public transit, benefits of such transit, and conclusion. The audience of this paper is the population of Milwaukee and the metropolitan area. Specifically, some of who are poor and cannot afford the costs of car ownership, others who are conscious about the environment and unable to follow their ideals, and those which care about safety or the economic benefits of such systems. Finally, politics seem to be the main cause of tension when it comes to supporting or disagreeing with public transportation.

History

The city of Milwaukee was first incorporated in 1846. In 1860, the first streetcars were introduced on the roads by one of the city's founders and early mayors, George Walker. These streetcars consisted of rail cars driven by horses that ran on tracks set at the same level as the street. From this came four major operators within the city: The Cream City Railroad Company,

the Milwaukee City Railroad Company, the Whitefish Bay Railway Company, and the West Side Railway Company. In 1890, the four street car companies were merged to form the Milwaukee Street Railway Company to offer more efficient and reliable service. After briefly falling into bankruptcy, the company came back in 1896 as The Milwaukee Electric Railway & Light Company. In 1926, the city requested a study of Milwaukee area transit. The study, which concluded in 1928, recommended the implementation of semi-rapid transit lines, rapid transit lines, streetcars and buses, car parking, and truck and rail freight routes. However, by 1960, the public service commission let the Milwaukee & Suburban Transport Company (successor to the Milwaukee Electric Railway & Light Company) convert its streetcars and trolley buses into normal bus routes. The Rapid Transit and Speedrail company, which bought the west and southwestern interurban lines, went bankrupt years prior and all transportation which was formerly provided were now provided by the Greyhound Corporation. In 1975, the Milwaukee & Suburban Transport company went bankrupt, and the bus service was acquired by the city of Milwaukee. In 2011, \$810 million dollars from the federal government were turned down which was for high speed rail between Milwaukee and Madison, and the Regional Transit Authority Act was repealed, which originally allowed for Milwaukee and the surrounding areas to establish joint control for future transit efforts. Today, the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) “operates 415 buses on 59 unique routes and transports 150,000 people per weekday” (Moore). Moore writes that “42% percent use the system for commuting to work or job searching, 11% for shopping, 12% to attend school, 15% for medical appointments and 6% for various other reasons” (Moore). A new city owned streetcar opened in 2018, operating along a 2.1-mile route from the intermodal station to Burns Commons park. Buses and streetcars aren’t enough to fill our transportation needs, which is what this paper is here to talk about.

This paper brings to light several proposals, some which have failed, and another which is still in the works, such as:

- A past proposal for a commuter rail line from Milwaukee to Racine and Kenosha
- The formerly planned expansion of the current Amtrak Hiawatha Service from Chicago to Milwaukee into a high-speed rail service from Chicago – Milwaukee – Madison
- A Milwaukee County commuter rail system

Failed/Past Proposals

KRM Commuter Link

The Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee Commuter Link or KRM, was a proposal for a commuter rail line from Milwaukee, Racine, and Kenosha that would've utilized existing train depots from the former C&NW North Line such as the Milwaukee intermodal station, Cudahy depot, South Milwaukee passenger station, Racine Depot, and Kenosha Station. New stations were intended for the South side of Milwaukee, Oak Creek, Caledonia, and Somers. The planned service would not operate on tracks owned by the state, but rather tracks owned by Union Pacific and Canadian Pacific Railway lines. According to the commission, "14 weekday trains would operate in each direction at top speeds of 59 mph



Figure 1 – Existing C&NW Stations in Kenosha (top) & Racine (bottom) to be utilized

with an average speed of 38 mph” (SEWRPC). Planners envisioned trains making connections with local transit systems such as MCTS, Belle Urban System, and Kenosha Area Transit at their respective stations. Special dedicated service was planned to shuttle people to the airport from the Cudahy/St. Francis station, and the Downtown Business District from the intermodal station in conjunction with the Hop/Milwaukee Streetcar. Trains would’ve also been scheduled to meet Metra trains at either the Kenosha station (current terminus of the Metra UP-North line) or this formerly proposed service would be extended beyond Kenosha and



Figure 2 - KRM Commuter Link Stations Map

Wisconsin to terminate at the Waukegan Metra station. The average travel time between Kenosha and Milwaukee is “expected to be 53 minutes”, assuming no delay in operations from freight trains and other disturbances (SEWRPC).

Benefits

- Faster travel time
- Higher reliability
- Reduced air pollution and energy consumption
- “900,000 jobs accessible within one mile of train stations” (SEWRPC)
- Comfort and Convenience

- Economic growth

Cons

- “\$207.5 million for capital costs” (SEWRPC)
- “\$10.35 million in operating costs” (SEWRPC)
- “15-17% farebox recovery” (Johnson)

Reasons for failure: While there was a funding mechanism in place by the Southeast Regional Transit Authority, the legislation that created such authority was repealed, which disbanded the authority and returned any funding it received.

Wisconsin High Speed Rail

With the proposed expansion of the Amtrak Hiawatha Service to Madison and conversion to high speed rail, people could’ve been able to travel from Madison, Milwaukee, and Chicago, at faster times than driving and flying. The planned extension of the service was the basis for extending the route to Minnesota. Passengers would’ve been able to make connections between Milwaukee airport, Chicago, and other services operated by Amtrak. All current stops would be kept with new



Figure 3 - Proposed route for the High Speed Rail with estimated speeds

stations planned to be built in Madison, Brookfield, Oconomowoc, and Watertown. For now,

“current speeds of 79mph will be kept on the current Hiawatha Service route”, while “speeds of 110mph will be reached on the Milwaukee – Madison corridor” (WisDOT).

Benefits

- Reliable, efficient, frequent and cost-effective rail service
- Unaffected by traffic congestion and weather
- Improves regional mobility
- Enhances intermobility
- Promotes economic development and livable communities
- Environmental benefits [see discussion for details]

Cons

- “Total cost of \$817 million dollars” (WisDOT)
- Travel time comparable to automobile and flight
- Speeds not truly at “high speed”
- Not going to be operational for few years.

Reasons for Failure: Federal funding was secured by the then previous governor Doyle, and then rejected by then governor Walker.

Current Proposal

Milwaukee County Commuter Rail

For the Milwaukee county commuter rail system, two existing stations will be used, the Milwaukee Intermodal station and Milwaukee Mitchell Airport station, while the others will be

all new. These new stations include the following: North Avenue, Century City Miller Coors, Miller Park, Valley, Lakefront, Bayview, Oklahoma, H2O, We Energies, Wauwatosa, Regional

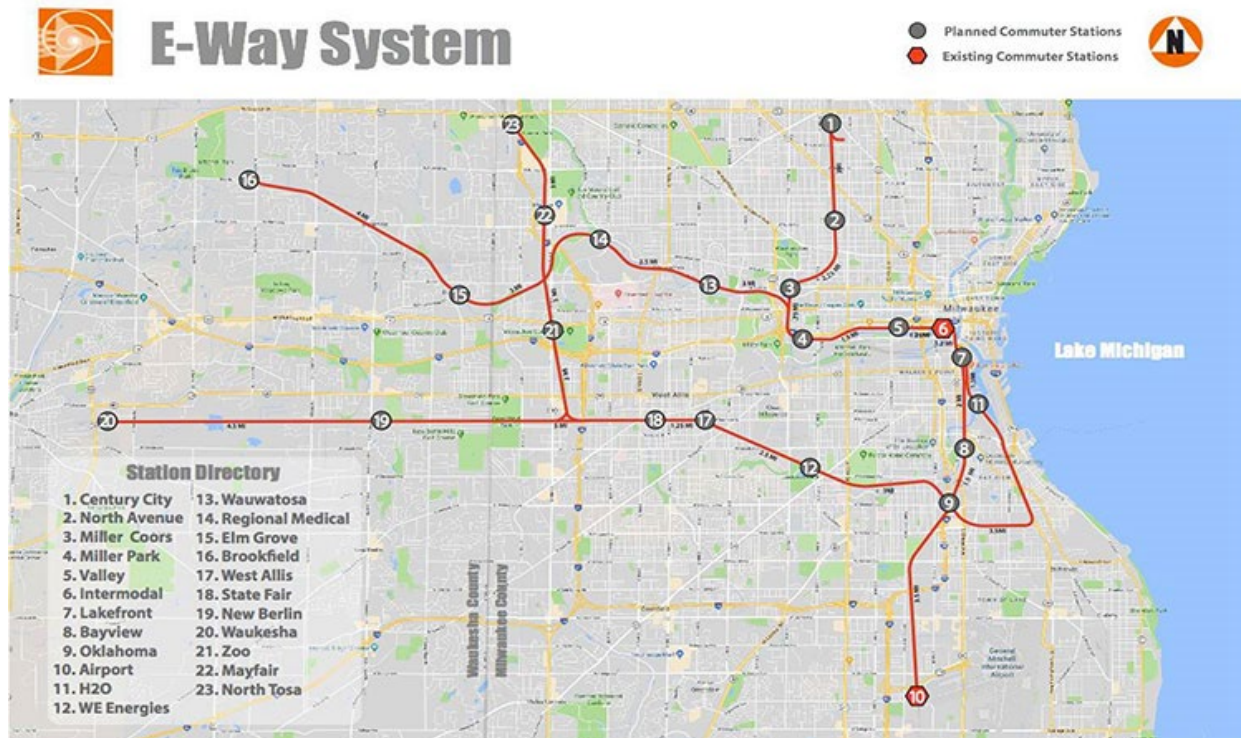


Figure 4 -MKE Commuter Rail Station Map

Medical, Elm Grove, Brookfield, West Allis, State Fair, New Berlin, Waukesha, Zoo, Mayfair, and North Tosa for a grand total of 23 stations. From the article, Romell and Rutledge report that the “commuter rail service would use 55 miles of existing tracks and 7,000 units of multi-family residential and other real estates such as retail and offices” (Romell and Rutledge).

Benefits: Unfortunately, there is no data researched on this as this specific proposal is a few months old, dating back to December of 2018, so I do not wish to assume benefits that this proposal may bring.

Pros: Environmental benefits [see discussion for details]

Cons: On the other side of things, the only con so far of this proposal is its reported price tag at “\$1.4 billion” (Romell and Rutledge).

Discussion of Benefits of Expansions

Milwaukee isn't the only city who can benefit from public transportation, and there are other cities that have benefitted from the addition of public transportation. In New Jersey, new off-peak commuter rail service resulted in a reduction of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in the range of “12.4-14.5 million”, while green house gas emission decreased in the range of “5,430-7.546 metric tons annually” (Deka & Marchwinski). A study on light rail in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada found that light rail transit would help households “reduce the 17-22% of their income that goes to transportation costs associated with automobile dependency” (Carter, J., et al). This same study also found that a “30-50% reduction in car traffic can help save 200 lives a year and \$900 million per year” (Carter, J., et al). The study once more saw that light rail transit, paired with “supportive land uses and increased density”, would result in an “increase of jobs per hectare and an increase of residential units along the corridor” (Carter, J., et al).

There are many benefits to the addition of regional rail, commuter rail, and high-speed rail to the Milwaukee area. Environmental benefits are many, with the reduction of automobile travel and airplane travel, reducing emissions and energy consumption. People will be connected to new jobs with these new options, and new jobs will be created locally to fill the positions of transit operations. Economic benefits will be created with the new stations and development surrounding them. Transportation in the region will be benefiting the most, allowing

Milwaukeeans to travel within the city, suburbs, and long distance within the metro area. Unfortunately, these benefits come with a price of a few cons. It will take a lot of money to fully build all these transportation options, with no ideas for funding them. All these options wouldn't be immediately ready to be built, as most of these proposals are from the past, so any studies and reports done on them would need to be redone all over again. Money will also be an issue, as these modes of transportation are expected to have costs higher than the money expected to be made, so the service will have to be subsidized with taxes, which won't go well with people. However, these decisions must be made with the greater good in mind, and a Milwaukee with economic benefits, health benefits, environmental benefits, is a greater good worth more than the costs associated with them.

Conclusion

Public transportation is expanding or being created across the country, however, none of that is happening in the Milwaukee area. Politics is the root cause of this, as both sides of the political spectrum have opposing views on public transit, leading to an impasse and eventual dead end. In both cases of the KRM Commuter Link and Wisconsin High Speed Rail, politics was the main cause of these proposals failing. The legislation for KRM which secured funding was repealed by the state legislature and the high-speed rail had federal funding, which was promptly rejected by then governor Walker. Wisconsin was not the only state to reject this funding: Ohio and Florida also rejected this money, which California then accepted. While we may never know the result of KRM, we however do have a glimpse of what could've been our high-speed rail with California. Even though California accepted this funding in 2008, the original route has still not been completed with many cost overruns. Though Milwaukee might've dodged a bullet with high speed rail and lost out on KRM, there is still one spot where

public transit may succeed: the Milwaukee County Commuter Rail System. The proposal is still out there, which is a nice start, but for it to become reality, politicians must be supportive of the project and find ways to make it thrive. You can call your local representatives and tell them to support this project, after all, you are their constituents, and you hold the final say of whether they stay in office with the power of your vote. Representatives can be reached by calling this number, 1-800-362-9472, or you can go to this website, <http://maps.legis.wisconsin.gov/>, enter your address and find information about your representatives.

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