



PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

400 LA CROSSE STREET | LA CROSSE, WI 54601 | P: (608) 789-7512

Memorandum

To: City of La Crosse Common Councilors
From: Lewis Kuhlman, AICP
Date: July 7, 2020
Re: Resolution supporting the Solutionary Rail Electrification Proposal & Northern Corridor Demonstration

The purpose of this memorandum is to address concerns at the June 11th Common Council meeting regarding a resolution of support for a rail electrification proposal. These concerns came to light after the June 2nd Judiciary and Administration Committee. Staff was present at that meeting and the full committee was present when this item was taken up. Staff received no questions at that time and the resolution was recommended for approval by a vote of 6 to 1 abstention. The following is a brief background on staff research and reasoning for support.

Staff thoroughly researched and presented this proposal before the Sustainable La Crosse Commission endorsed the concept earlier this year. This innovation could improve working and living conditions around the railroad by reducing pollution and creating and keeping jobs in the area. While it would have a positive impact on La Crosse, it takes leadership at the State and corporate level to make happen. It also uses the railroad corridor for energy transmission from areas with high solar and wind potential; doubling up on this corridor could reduce the impact on other land, such as in the La Crosse River marsh, for energy transmission lines.

This resolution is at the beginning of a long process. It simply encourages the study of the feasibility of the project, not full-blown implementation, so many details have yet to be determined. Staff had researched BNSF environmental advancements before preparing the resolution. They have been a beneficial corporate citizen and this encouragement is a friendly way to get them involved in the carbon-neutral future La Crosse has resolved to be a part of.

Rail electrification is consistent with the City's carbon neutrality goal for 2050. This goal includes all transportation, and not just automobiles. While this goal is thirty years away, that makes big thinking more attainable the earlier it is done. Don't be scared by speculation on the cost. BNSF's profits were \$5.48 billion in 2019. It's owner, Warren Buffet has a net worth of \$70.8 Billion and gave away \$3.6 Billion in 2019 according to Forbes. BNSF is not alone on this proposal – it includes seven states. Wisconsin's transportation budget was \$6.6 billion according to Gov. Evers 2019-2021 Budget in Brief, and that's just one state. These billions of dollars over thirty years can make a clean energy future possible with an early commitment. Even if that still seems like a high cost, we are seeing that the cost of inaction on climate change is frequently higher than continuing the path of least resistance.

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To conclude, this resolution encourages BNSF and Wisconsin (along with six other states) to begin working together to figure out if rail electrification is feasible. La Crosse's early support will help to ensure it continues to have a stake throughout and be involved in its on-the-ground implementation in years to come. Rail electrification is in line with the City's carbon neutrality goals by 2050. Over thirty years, the costs will be easier to absorb. Encouraging action now will help reduce future costs and pollution due to fossil fuels, while also improving lives locally.