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Urban, rural views on commuter train aired

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WISCONSIN DELLS — Business and political leaders from an eight-county region around Madison cleared the air Tuesday — for the time being anyway — about passenger trains, a hot topic that has proved divisive between city and rural folks.

"I just hope they will be still listening to the outlying communities so that we can work together," said Don Tierney, a DeForest developer. He said there is significant animosity in some rural areas over the current proposal for a train through Madison.

Tierney told members of the Collaboration Council at their biannual meeting that any new transportation system must be user friendly, and he used his pickup truck as an example of what works for him. The council is an unofficial group of leaders looking for ways businesses and communities can cooperate to gain a competitive edge against other parts of the country and world.

Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk, a council member, addressed Tierney's concern, asking "How does a guy in a pickup truck benefit from the RTA?" Falk said she has been lobbying legislators to allow the RTA to work on improving roads in addition to building the train line.

The discussion took place at Glacier Canyon Lodge as the state Legislature is about to vote on a budget provision that would enable Dane County to create an authority that could collect taxes and seek federal money for passenger rail. If passed by the Legislature and signed by the governor, the provision could breathe new life into a proposed commuter train through Madison. The federal government rejected an application for funding because there was no plan for local financial support.

The commuter train is the result of years of planning and public hearings, but questions and misunderstandings abound, said Rafael Carbonell, executive vice president of Thrive, a regional economic development group that has endorsed the state legislation.

"This has been a very contentious issue and it's been muddled by a lot of misinformation," Carbonell said.

Thrive, an affiliate of the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce, hasn't taken a position on whether a train line should be built, but it has said the RTA legislation is a crucial platform for a broader discussion of many transportation options for the whole region.

Thousands of people commute each day in and out of the Dane County, and all have a stake in transportation planning for the rapidly growing

region, Carbonell said.

Keynote speaker Neal Peirce told the group that disagreement between city and country is common when regional cooperation efforts begin. But in places like Denver and Seattle and Charlotte, the obstacles were overcome and great things came of it.

Peirce is a Washington journalist who writes a syndicated column and operates Citistates, which has studied transportation and growth options for dozens of U.S. cities.

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