



MASON CITY

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

November 16, 2006

Councilmember Scott Tornquist
City of Mason City
1 Bittersweet Street NE
Mason City IA 50401

RE: 19th Street Overpass

Dear Councilmember Tornquist:

Next Tuesday is an important day in the history of Mason City. You will be asked to vote on the design of a railroad overpass on 19th Street. Specifically, you and your colleagues will direct the City's consultant to design the overpass to accommodate either one or two rail service providers.

The history surrounding the development of this overpass- the recognition of the need for it, the lobbying trips to Washington, DC, *et cetera*- has been related on many recent occasions. Rather than repeat the history, I will focus on *why* the staff and board of the Mason City Economic Development Corporation believe designing an overpass to accommodate two rail service providers is critically important. I will also address what I believe are some of the misconceptions surrounding this overpass design decision.

Tuesday night's decision is just this: one or two rail providers. We believe the overpass should be built to accommodate two providers for the following reasons:

1. **This decision has a long-term impact.** Your decision is essentially irreversible for the life of the overpass itself (likely 80+ years). Your decision will impact development in Mason City for decades. This is your opportunity to take a long view and optimistically plan for future growth. If the overpass is built without a second provider option, and a second provider attempts to serve the industrial area, the likely result is another at-grade crossing on 19th Street, recreating the problems the overpass was designed to solve.
2. **The ability to accommodate a second rail provider will make Mason City more competitive in economic development efforts.** We researched fifteen states, including the seven that surround Iowa (the border states plus Kansas due to its close proximity). Our study showed only *three other cities in Iowa and less than thirty in the study area* that offered large (15-1200 acre) sites comparable to Mason City's in that they are close to four-lane highways and commercial airports *and* offer the availability of two rail providers. Economic

development is highly competitive and we need all of the advantages that we can get as we work to differentiate our location from many worthy competitors across the country.

3. **The delegation from Mason City that has annually presented our community's legislative priorities to our federal legislators has developed strong credibility with our senators, members of Congress and staff.** This strong relationship has paid dividends for Mason City. One notable recent example is a large contribution to the water tower project in the south annexed area. The Mason City delegation, heeding the counsel of legislative staff members, has represented the 19th Street overpass project as including room for two rail providers and has emphasized this economic development advantage in its requests to our elected officials.
4. **The City, County and federal government have already invested in the future growth of the south annexed area.** The extension and paving of Pierce Avenue, the paving of 43rd Street and the construction of the water tower are all evidence of a governmental commitment to grow jobs in the south annexed area. Considering this investment, it makes sense to make the incremental investment in the overpass to ensure that Mason City's south annexed area is as ready and competitive to receive business as possible. That includes offering business and industry a choice in railroads rather than virtually ensuring a monopoly.

It has also become clear that misconceptions exist surrounding this project.

1. **This decision is not a referendum on industrial development in the south annexed area.** The decision to be considered by the City Council on November 21 is about designing the 19th Street overpass in a way that preserves the option to accommodate a second rail provider. The decision is about planning for the long-term good of the people of Mason City. The conversation surrounding this project has quickly and inexplicably moved from consideration of a second rail provider under the overpass to a wholesale revision of growth plans for the south annexed area. Both the annexation study and the Comprehensive Plan envisioned controlled industrial growth in the annexed area. The EDC will continue to represent the sites in the area as good possibilities for industrial development. Excluding a second rail provider in the area only makes us less competitive in our efforts.
2. **This project is not about the Iowa Traction Railroad.** Again, the decision before the Council is about good long-term planning, not any specific industrial development or railroad. Iowa Traction Railroad is but one potential user of a second viaduct under the overpass.
3. **The council and citizens have numerous opportunities to define and direct the growth of the south annexed area.** Currently, the area is zoned "Agricultural" with the exception of Golden Grain Energy which is zoned "Heavy Industrial." This means any new use in the south annexed area will be subject to the rezoning process. This rezoning will require a review and public hearing by the Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council before it is approved. Second, because of the restrictive nature of the City Code with regard to industrial zoning, new developments will likely require a conditional use permit. Finally, major new industries in the south annexed area will likely access public financial incentives that must be approved by the City Council. In summary, voting to approve an overpass design to accommodate a second rail provider

does *not* in itself ensure the type, nature or pace of development in the south annexed area.

4. **Protections for the neighborhood southwest of 19th Street and Federal Avenue are already anticipated for the south annexed area.** In addition to the zoning "checkpoints" referenced in the paragraph above, the Mason City Comprehensive Plan specifies the area east of Pierce Avenue to be Light Industrial and the area west of Pierce Avenue and south of 43rd Street to be General Industrial. The Comprehensive Plan also anticipates the following in the south annexed area:

"Residential Development that would complete the growth of the residential neighborhood that is southwest of 19th Street and Federal Avenue. This area would be buffered from the industrial area by a greenbelt that follows drainage ways and connects Frederick Hanford and Georgia Hanford Parks."

The "Light Industrial" zoning classification is specified in the Mason City code as:

"designed to provide an environment suitable for industrial activities that do not create appreciable nuisances or hazards, or that require a pleasant, hazard- and nuisance-free environment. It is intended that the permitted uses be compatible and not detrimental to adjacent properties."

The "Heavy Industrial" district generally does not permit any use that is more intense than those allowed in the "Light Industrial" district without first applying for and receiving a conditional use permit.

Thank you for your careful consideration of this decision. I believe that there are certain decisions made in the life of a community that impact its fortunes for decades and this overpass decision is one of them. Please advise if I can be of any further assistance. Your service to our community is appreciated.

Sincerely,



Curtis Brown
Executive Director