

19th Street Overpass (Tornquist Assessment)

At the regularly scheduled council meeting on Tuesday, November 7th, the Mason City Council will be asked to make a decision that will forever impact the future of our community. The decision is not whether or not we build a bridge over the Union Pacific track on 19th Street; that is a foregone conclusion. Rather, the decision is how big to make the bridge; shall we make the bridge big enough to address only the UP needs, or shall we make the bridge big enough to accommodate a second provider. It is imperative we get this decision right the first time.

As it stands, the current design will accommodate the existing Union Pacific track, and space for a second UP track next to the existing in the same bridge span. The UP currently has the required right of way to add this second track should they so desire. While this bridge will accommodate two tracks, they would be from a single provider.

The question at hand is whether or not we spend an incremental \$200,000 to \$400,000 to create the opportunity for Iowa Traction, a second provider, to pass under the bridge. With the suggested design, the Iowa Traction railroad could pass under the next span east of the UP space. While the UP requires 23ft clearance, the Iowa Traction requires only 18 ft. However, for an additional \$100,000, we can build this span at 23ft clear, meaning we would not be limiting ourselves to the Iowa Traction as the potential second provider.

I am of the opinion that we should, indeed we must, commit to the incremental \$300,000 to \$500,000 to build a bridge big enough to accommodate a second provider. This is based upon funding implications, and economic development opportunities.

Outside funding has been committed to the project at both the state and federal levels. At the state level, we've received \$1,000,000 in funding from the Iowa Clean Air Attainment Program, and expect \$1,000,000 more. This program (ICAAP) has provided funding based on the opportunity to reduce air pollution by eliminating idling automobile traffic as the crossing is blocked by trains. Accordingly, this funding is not dependent upon the number of tracks or providers that have access under the bridge.

At the federal level, the House has approved \$1,000,000 (and Senate approval is expected) in FY07 transportation grants, and an additional \$1,000,000 is anticipated in FY08. Unlike the ICAAP criteria, the federal grants have been based upon the economic development opportunities created by having the ability to add a second provider to the newly annexed area. In short, if we don't maintain the ability to supply a second provider, we place the federal funding commitment at risk. In addition to requiring an incremental \$2,000,000 from local taxpayers to complete the project (current project estimate is \$7.54 million, with \$3.14 million from local taxpayers), we would severely damage our credibility with our federal legislators. It is imperative that we commit the additional \$300,000 to \$500,000 to maintain the \$2,000,000 federal commitment.

With respect to economic development, the ability to offer competitive rail service to business prospects puts Mason City in a very unique and exclusive environment when it comes to attracting new business. The community may recall the new biodiesel plant located where they did due to their desire for competitive rail service. This relatively small investment in infrastructure on the part of our community should help us leverage our assets and help spur new development in the recently annexed

area. This in turn will help grow our tax base and create new jobs, which has a positive impact on every taxpayer.

It is important to remember this decision is not about how the annexed area is or should be zoned, or where the second provider may lay track. All of those issues can and will be worked out in a public forum as they materialize. Neither is this decision a commitment to actually build track for a second provider under the bridge and to the annexed area; it is simply a decision to maintain that ability in the future.

Last November the voters of Mason City overwhelmingly agreed we should maintain the ability to manage our own telecommunications infrastructure sometime in the future. We did not vote to actually install infrastructure, but simply to protect the option to do so. That decision maintains the opportunity for competition, which thereby minimizes the negative impacts of a potential monopoly. The decision regarding the number of providers with access under the bridge is very similar. We may not ever add a second provider, but by maintaining the ability to do so, we create a positive business climate for existing and future prospects in the annexed area. If we eliminate the opportunity for rail competition with bridge construction, we forever commit ourselves to a sole provider to businesses that locate in the annexed area to the south.

We need to leave our options open. The risk of not building the bridge to accommodate a second provider in the future far outweighs the incremental investment in the bridge. We need to commit the incremental \$300,000 to \$500,000 to maximize our opportunity to create jobs and grow the tax base.

Scott Tornquist
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