

SAVAGE Pacer



A New Ride?

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There is renewed public interest in a passenger rail line named after Dan Patch that would stretch through Savage.

Last month, Savage Mayor Janet Williams and City Administrator Barry Stock attended a public meeting that Edina hosted to see how interested residents were in a passenger rail service that would run along the Dan Patch Corridor, a railroad track constructed in 1908 that now carries freight. Mark Nolan, Edina's transportation planner, said more residents have vocalized interest in the idea, and that's why the city decided to conduct a community engagement report. The report will be complete in late September or early October and will show whether the city should advocate for the project, Nolan said.



The city of Edina is also considering helping to lift a gag order that prevents even studying the project. It's a major change given that state legislators from Edina, Bloomington and Lakeville implemented the gag order to stop state and regional authorities from studying any commuter rail service in the corridor, which spans from Minneapolis to Savage, according to city documents. These authorities include the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Metropolitan Council.

"That was 15 years ago now," Nolan said. "Things do change over time," he said.

History

The Dan Patch Line was created by famous businessman Marion W. Savage in 1908. He used the line to transport tourists from Minneapolis to his farm in Savage, previously known as Hamilton, according to city documents. People would go to see his famous racehorse, Dan Patch, and the train looked like early diesel electric streetcars, city documents show.

The service became an economic failure and now it's a freight service, according to city documents. Canadian Pacific now runs shipments in one round trip per day between Bloomington and the Humboldt

Yard in North Minneapolis along the corridor. The Twin Cities and Western Railroad could also use the line to carry grain from western Minnesota to Port Savage's grain elevators, documents say.

The costs for the project could be steep; in 2001, the Minnesota Department of Transportation conducted a feasibility study for the Dan Patch Corridor from Minneapolis to Lakeville. Ultimately it found there wouldn't be enough support and ridership.

Nolan said the city wants to keep its options as open as possible. If this moves forward, there are all kinds of public transportation possibilities, he said, including commuter rail, light rail trains or even bus rapid transit.

"We're trying to make it clear to folks we're not just considering [light rail]," Nolan said.

Support

New technology has emerged to offer new options that are safer and more affordable, such as something called Positive Train Control.

"Under Positive Train Control, all trains will now be equipped with electronic equipment that will automatically stop any trains of any kind that find themselves on a collision course with another train on the same track," city documents say.

Critics of the project are still concerned about the noise impact, said state representative Drew Christensen.

"I've heard a lot about the issue from folks in Savage," Christensen said. "People are not really supportive of a train across the river. If you look at train tracks they go quite literally through people's backyards."

He said he would support bus rapid transit.

"It's a lot more bang for your buck than with light rail trains," he said.

Sen. Dan Hall could not be reached for comment this week.

Mayor Williams said she thinks the Legislature should lift the gag order so that new transportation options can be studied.

"The city of Savage has always been supportive of lifting the gag order that the Legislature put on," she said.

She also said more young people are not getting their driver's licenses until later and want to bike or use public transportation.

"I think we need to look into the future," she said. "And to not look into alternatives, I don't think that's wise. I think we need to be more visionary."

In the meantime, the city of Edina will be working on its study. News will arrive this fall about how they'll move forward. If they support it, then state legislators will be contacted and then cities will have to encourage the lifting of the gag order. From there, more studies can be completed.

“There’s a still a lot of things that would have to happen,” Nolan said.