

Memo to Rochester: Time to drop fight against DM&E plans

*Scare tactics are
over the top*

The long and nasty dispute between the Dakota, Minnesota and Eastern Railroad and Rochester city officials and Mayo Clinic leaders has reached a fever pitch. With any luck at all, this dragged-out mess will end soon.

The dispute centers on DM&E's proposal to rebuild 600 miles of track and add 260 miles of new track to reach the low-sulfur coal found in Wyoming's Powder River Basin. The DM&E needs \$2.4 billion in federal government loans to start the \$6 billion project.

The DM&E has reached agreements with 55 communities impacted by its plans. Rochester is the lone hold-out and has doggedly fought the railroad tooth-and-nail.

Rochester opponents have attacked the proposal on several fronts. Environmental concerns and safety issues are at the top of the list. Opponents have also suggested that DM&E won't be able to repay the federal loan and therefore should be denied. They rallied and took out full-page newspaper ads last week during President George Bush's visit to Minnesota to pressure him to kill the loan.

The anti-DM&E crowd has made much of the risk posed by the railroad, as if it hasn't had lines going through the city for decades. Mayo Clinic officials have criticized DM&E's safety record, in particular noting the number of derailments along the line.

DM&E President Kevin Schieffer responds that the number of derailments is directly linked to deteriorating track conditions that would be corrected through the project.

Mayo Clinic CEO Glenn Forbes and other clinic representative have made much of the supposed danger from more and faster train traffic through the city. Forbes maintains that a derailment in the downtown area — a real risk, he says, because the DM&E is the most unsafe railroad in the country — would endanger Mayo patients and all of Rochester.



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Forbes's scare tactics are over the top.

The Federal Surface Transportation Board has already granted DM&E regulatory approval for the upgrade and the expansion. The Environmental Impact Statement process concluded that the upgrade would actually improve safety up and down the line.

That fact isn't much use to Rochester's civic leaders, so they ignore it. Their continued resistance puts the project at risk of dying from a thousand small cuts.

The DM&E project is vitally important to farmers, grain elevators and ethanol plants across the state. With coal demand outstripping supply, DM&E would be able to haul more coal more efficiently. The mistake made by DM&E is that it initially underestimated the lengths Mayo and Rochester's civic leaders would go to to quash its project. They fully understand it now.

A pro-DM&E group, GOTRAC, is making its voice heard.

"There's too much good at stake for Minnesotans for the rail upgrade to be blocked," said Frank Welter, CEO of People's Cooperative Service in Rochester. "Rochester's rehashing arguments it has already lost before the federal Surface Transportation Board."

Indeed they are.

What is particularly disheartening is that the DM&E has gone through every regulatory hurdle required of it and still it is not enough. What more can its opponents want? There is risk involved in everything. I'd take my chances with a train rather than a highway crowded with trucks.

The irony is, without the railroad, chances are the Mayo brothers would have never located their business in Rochester. It's time for the city to step back, talk to DM&E and reach an agreement that's needed to get this project on track.