

Editorial: Plan still has value
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Although the nation's most ambitious rail project in more than a century has essentially ground to a halt, there are those who remain convinced of its value. Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., is among them – despite the railroad's failed attempt to secure a multibillion dollar loan from the Federal Railroad Administration.

Thune has backed the project as far back as the early 1990s when he was South Dakota's rail director and he continued as a U.S. Representative. In the two years between the end of his term as a representative and the start of his term as a U.S. Senator, he represented DM&E's interests to various federal agencies.

Opposition from some landowners and cities along the route might have played a role in the denial of the federal loan. Hopefully, DM&E will be able to secure the private sector funding it needs.

The railroad wants to build 260 miles of new track from the coal fields in Wyoming's Powder River Basin. That would allow the fields to be connected with existing DM&E lines in South Dakota. In addition, an estimated 600 miles of existing track would be upgraded to handle increased traffic when coal trains start heading east.

The demand for power from those plants is not going to lessen. The ability to meet those increased demands for electrical power will depend on finding a way to increase production.

There's another factor to DM&E's expansion project that makes it attractive to many South Dakotans. The new and improved rail lines will be a plus for South Dakota farmers and business people who use railroads to ship their products.

No project the size and scope of DM&E's is without its problems and critics. And while the concerns of the critics need to be addressed, in the end the benefits of an overhauled and expanded rail line through South Dakota and southern Minnesota offers too many positives to be completely forgotten.