

Article published Dec 10, 2005

Rail plan on right track

The entire community is on the verge of a boon in the form of the plan to relocate the railyard, the industrial development portion of which was formally presented Thursday.

A long-term and ambitious project, the plan to move the switching yards from the south side of the city center to a Rutland Town site near Route 4 westbound is a win for everyone.

It opens up several parcels for development in a strip behind Dick's Sporting Goods and the Holiday Inn and to the south, each of which would have excellent access to both road and rail, providing jobs and tax revenues to both city and town. It moves what was once an economic marvel but is now a blight - the railyards and associated warehouse-type buildings — away from the downtown core. Redevelopment of the yards would provide a street-level connection between the downtown shopping and the Howe Scale project.

It also gives the community a chance to create a modern, livable, workable space that will attract people to the city center. Initial plans call for mixed-use development of moderate density, but the details on that will undoubtedly need to be hashed out over a period of time before anything is finalized.

It is rare for a city to be handed such a potentially lucrative and attractive parcel for development so large and so close to the city center these days. Successful examples, such as Burlington turning its waterfront railway right-of-way into a thriving park/commercial/museum center, show what the possibilities are. The city needs to do a good job because there will be no second chance.

The plans also call for the River Street bridge to be removed, with the train tracks instead going over a bridge, eliminating the barrier to foot traffic between the Gut to the west and Route 4 to the east.

There are still some hurdles to be overcome: The need to relocate some businesses on the western edge of the current yard; the need to attract tenants to the spaces being created on the new railyard - and with that, the need to get the Act 250 folks to cooperate on providing an effective umbrella permit allowing in advance certain types of

businesses without a second, full review.

And Matthew Sternberg, the executive director of the Rutland Redevelopment Authority, has pledged to find ways to cooperatively relocate those property owners who will have to move, instead of relying on the option of eminent domain, which should be used only as a last resort.

But that's what makes this project so unusual thus far. Government entities from town, city, state and federal levels have worked together to plan the rail project, both in Rutland County and as part of a revitalized rail corridor up and down the western edge of the state. They have to keep working positively, but they've definitely got some momentum started.

It's good for the environment, as streamlined rail service is a far cleaner and more efficient way to move freight than building more highways.

Private companies have gotten involved, like Omya, which has partnered to make a new spur line to its plant part of the process, thereby reducing the truck traffic through places like Brandon and Pittsford. Politicians have thrown their support behind the project, including local councils and Sen. James Jeffords, who was instrumental in getting the federal money that is essential to starting the whole thing.

Unlike some proposals which masquerade as economic development but don't even come with, for example an adequate impact study, this is the real thing: a well-planned, widely supported project that should bring jobs and a better quality of life to Rutland and surrounding communities.

Last, but certainly not least, credit has to go to Sternberg and the Redevelopment Authority. Over the past few months, not a planner nor a politician in the area has failed to mention how they are looking forward to the railyard project, when discussing the city's future. Sternberg has successfully guided a hugely complex project to this point; it's time for the entire community to keep it moving forward.