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GLBT formal application on hold



Visitors look at a map of a proposed rail line through Porter County on Tuesday, April 12, 2016, during a public meeting with the Surface Transportation Board in Valparaiso, IN. (Kyle Telechan, Post-Tribune)

By **Amy Lavalley**

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While the federal Surface Transportation Board has extended the comment period for a proposed freight rail line that would slice through southern Lake and Porter counties for another month, those behind the project have yet to file a formal application.

Great Lakes Basin Transportation's founder and managing partner Frank Patton and its president, Jim Wilson, said they would file their application later this year, after getting feedback from the federal agency on the comments and concerns submitted as part of the Environmental Impact Statement process.

That feedback, they said, will allow them to tweak their plans before they submit a formal application. They met with officials from the STB in September to get on a key projects list, the starting point for the federal agency to schedule public meetings for the Environmental Impact Statement.

"The decision was made to figure out what the route was going to be before we filed the application. It's a chicken and egg thing," Patton said, adding the STB will send the freight line's principals alternatives and

suggestions culled from the public comments and ask for their response.

GLBT proposes a 278-mile freight line with a proposed route from Milton, Wis., to LaPorte County to provide a bypass for the congested Chicago rail yard. Patton has said the \$8 billion project will be privately funded and take trucks off the roads, and have the capacity for up to 110 trains a day.

Critics filled the STB's public meetings on the project in April and have flooded the federal agency with letters since then. An official with the agency's Office of Environmental Analysis has said the response is unprecedented, generating up to 30 letters a day. Concerns focus on loss of valuable farmland, drainage woes, the proposed route's proximity to schools, and public safety worries.

Most recently, the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#), or CMAP, filed a letter June 13 in which Thomas Kotarac, the deputy executive director for policy and programming, writes, "Potential new development induced by a new railroad raises concerns about loss of agricultural and natural resources, lack of appropriate public infrastructure, and local zoning changes required to mitigate land use conflicts, as well as the broader issues of failing to invest in existing communities."

Patton expects the application will be filed three to six months after the public comment period ends on July 15, and will include the formal route and other details, including the freight line's business case.

"They want to make sure that when you start building, you will finish and it will be profitable," Patton said.

The federal agency will bring GLBT's leaders a list of questions to be answered and alternatives to be considered as the application is put together, Wilson said.

"We presented our preferred route and we will take the comments and come up with a really, really preferred route," he said.

GLBT has not informed the federal agency on when they plan to file but officials anticipate it will be later this year, STB spokesman Dennis Watson said in an email.

Based on the freight line's application, the STB will make the final determination on whether the line will proceed on GLBT's preferred route, an alternate route or not at all.

In addition to the Environmental Impact Statement, the process includes a merit review, in which Watson said "the applicant must demonstrate that the project is not inconsistent with the public convenience and necessity."

Two of the Class 1 railroads that were supposed to be served by GLBT have publicly stated they will not participate and the remaining four appear uncommitted to the project.

The STB will consider various factors, he said, including economic, commercial, financial and competitive issues, to assess the project's overall transportation and public benefits.

"The board's final decision on the merits will also incorporate the findings of the EIS and recommendations for

environmental mitigation measures," Watson said, adding that includes a public comment period as well. A decision on the project's merit can't be issued until after the EIS is complete.

Amy Lavalley is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.

To comment:

Comments can be submitted electronically on the Surface Transportation Board's website, www.stb.dot.gov, by clicking on the "E-filing" link on the home page and then selecting "Environmental Comments." Comments should refer to Docket No. FD 35952.

The deadline to submit online comments is July 15.

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