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FM Council likes plan to cut train traffic

A railroad realignment that detours a large portion of Fort Morgan's current train traffic away from the city is the preferred choice of the Fort Morgan City Council.

The council discussed a resolution at its Tuesday work session to support Alignment B of the Railroad Relocation for Colorado Communities (R2C2) initiative. The resolution was placed on the consent agenda for next week's regular council meeting, and items on that agenda are routinely approved without further discussion.

Alignment B is one of two alternatives proposed under R2C2, which is intended to divert much of the train traffic that currently goes through the Front Range area to new tracks on the eastern plains.

Alignment B would build a new line that heads south from the existing Burlington Northern Santa Fe rail lines just east of Brush. This would divert more than half of the trains which now pass through Fort Morgan to the new line, according to estimates.

The other alternative, Alignment A, would place the new north-south line west of Wiggins near the Morgan-Weld county line, so it would have little impact on the volume of trains in Fort Morgan.

The benefit of Alignment B for Fort Morgan is that it would eliminate most of the trains that come through the city, but the city would still have the economic development attraction of a rail line passing through the city, said City Attorney Jeffrey Wells.

The resolution proposed for approval by the council next week notes that the R2C2 model showed 25 trains a day through Fort Morgan in 2007, and Alignment B would divert about 17 of those, or nearly 70 percent.

The resolution also states that the city "believes that the detour of trains on Alignment B ... would enhance the public health and safety of the citizens of Fort Morgan."

Police Chief Keith Kuretich, who attended an R2C2 meeting in Brush on Tuesday afternoon, said at Tuesday's council meeting that Colorado Department of Transportation officials there estimated that freight train traffic is expected to double in the next 20 years.

They could not give an estimate on a scale of 1 to 10 of the likelihood of the R2C2 project becoming a reality, Kuretich said, but "the only thing they knew is it's going to happen."

While the council resolution supports Alignment B "to mitigate the travel delays, noise and public safety issues" for Fort Morgan residents, it also urges CDOT to "carefully evaluate the concerns regarding the use of eminent domain and the long-term fair market value for the land required to construct a future Alignment B."

It also encourages CDOT to eventually develop a final route that uses existing highway or transmission line corridors to limit the effects on agricultural lands.

Other business

Also at Tuesday's work session, the council:

- Discussed a liquor license renewal for the Rodeway Inn on Barlow Road and placed the item on next week's consent agenda.
- Discussed a new identity theft policy for the city utility billing department that will help protect personal information of utility customers. The policy is mandated under a new federal law going into effect Nov. 1, and this item was also placed on next week's consent agenda.
- Held a lengthy discussion of the city's options for a long-term arrangement for purchase of electric power. The city's current agreement with the Municipal Energy Agency of Nebraska does not expire until 2013, but MEAN is urging the city to convert to a longer-term contract that would allow the city to avoid price increases being phased in for its current contract level.

Utilities Director Robert Weimer and the city's utility rate consultant recommend committing to a long-term deal with MEAN, noting that the electric market is extremely volatile and new sources of power are more expensive and difficult to find.

City Manager Pat Merrill said the choice is akin to deciding between a fixed or variable rate mortgage, coming down to long-term security versus "rolling the dice a bit."

"Volatility is what we have to look at, to avoid it," Merrill said.

Mayor Jack Darnell suggested doing some sort of comprehensive master plan for the utility department before making a decision.

"If we go 15 or 20 years with MEAN it's a big step," Darnell said.

The city has until April 1 to make a decision on extending with MEAN, Weimer said.

- Discussed bids for a feasibility study for creating a railroad quiet zone, in a grant-funded cooperative effort with Brush and Sterling; for the salt/sand storage building; for a security fence at the water treatment plant; and for an electric underground boring project. Those bids will be on next week's agenda for approval.

By John Brennan, Times Editor