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Scott Walker says he opposes the KRM commuter rail line

By Larry Sandler of the Journal Sentinel

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Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker said Friday he is now opposed to the proposed \$283.5 million KRM Commuter Link rail line.

Walker, a Republican candidate for governor, has long opposed other forms of rail transit. He has spoken out against plans for a high-speed rail route between Milwaukee and Madison and for a modern streetcar line in downtown Milwaukee, as well as previous proposals for light rail or guided electric buses in Milwaukee.

Until now, however, Walker has not been a vocal opponent of the commuter train line that would connect downtown Milwaukee to Kenosha, Racine and the southern suburbs. KRM backers thought they had won his support by planning to fund the line with a rental car tax of up to \$18 a car, instead of their preferred tool of a new regional sales tax. Walker has steadfastly opposed any new local sales taxes, as have some Racine County leaders.

The rental car tax, which could rise with inflation, is expected to cover more than 17% of construction costs and 19% of the projected \$20.4 million annual operating cost.

But in an interview Friday afternoon, Walker said he could not support the KRM, because he believes the rental car tax would

ultimately prove inadequate to fund the project and eventually would be replaced by a sales tax.

Walker said he had told KRM backers "the rental car tax is less objectionable than the sales tax." But, he added, "Right now, with the numbers they're talking about, I don't think it's realistic" to believe the rental car tax would suffice. He said, "The potential for switching to the sales tax is unacceptable."

Also, the state transportation fund would cover 40% of KRM operating costs and more than 16% of construction costs. Walker believes that money should be used for existing bus systems and highways. He said he wouldn't back the rail line "unless there's some way they could fund it privately."

RTA official dismayed

In a separate interview, Julia Taylor, vice chairman of the Southeastern Regional Transit Authority, responded, "Over the years, Scott has expressed support for the concept of commuter rail. I'm disappointed that he is changing his position."

Nearly two-thirds of KRM construction funding would come from the federal government, but federal officials have said they wouldn't back the project unless the beleaguered Milwaukee County Transit System and its Racine and Kenosha counterparts are financially stabilized. Legislation to expand the RTA and provide a 0.5% sales tax for the Milwaukee County bus system died in the Legislature last month.

Taylor, who is also president of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, said the regional business community remains strongly in support of both the KRM and of aiding public bus systems.

But in response to Walker's comment about privately funding the KRM, Taylor said, "I don't think that's going to happen. I don't think that's how government funds its infrastructure."

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