

South Bend Tribune

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Viewpoint: South Shore, Chamber: Get on board!

Marty Wolfson South Bend Tribune

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The South Shore Railroad proposed a rerouting of its tracks to approach the airport from the west, in order to save 10 minutes on the train trip between South Bend and Chicago. The Chamber of Commerce strongly supported this plan, even though it would cost \$25 million and destroy 30 or more homes in the Ardmore area.

But resistance to this plan is building:

- Residents of the Ardmore area have organized, mobilized, attended meetings of the South Bend Common Council and other public bodies — in their orange T-shirts — and mounted a vigorous campaign to save their neighborhood.
- The South Bend council unanimously passed an ordinance calling on the South Shore to consider a rerouting plan that preserves houses in the Ardmore neighborhood area.
- The Tribune Editorial Board said that the Ardmore homeowners “shouldn’t have to pay a high price for the growth and progress that this plan (to shorten the trip to Chicago) could bring to South Bend.”

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- Residents from Ardmore suggested an idea, also proposed by op-ed writer William O’Rourke, to build a new train station in the large unused field near Sheridan Street and Ardmore Trail, right next to the existing tracks. Doing so would avoid destroying homes but still shave 10 minutes off the travel time to Chicago.

- The city of South Bend, which would be responsible for the \$25 million, put the brakes on the rerouting plan and is doing a study on possible new stations that would avoid destroying homes.

The South Shore and the Chamber, however, do not appear to have changed their minds. In a recent column in *The Tribune*, Chamber President and CEO Jeff Rea asserted that “the airport is (still) a good fit for the South Shore station.”

He argues that saving 10 minutes is worth the cost “of relocating some homes west of the airport.” This argument is really irrelevant, since the 10 minutes will be saved if the tracks are rerouted to the west side of the airport or if the train station is moved to Sheridan Street. But the cost is not just “relocating some homes.” The cost is losing the home you have lived in for years, losing your neighbors and losing your community. Is it even possible to put a price tag on that?

Rea speaks of the development opportunities available to the west of the airport. Why, though, does it make sense to ask city taxpayers to finance development on land that is not even in the city of South Bend? Especially when locating a new train station in the city could spur sorely needed development in the LaSalle Square area and in the surrounding area on the west side of South Bend.

Why are the South Shore and the Chamber resisting what seems to be a very reasonable solution? Could it be that there is a financial advantage to the South Shore for staying at the airport? The airport’s 2016 financial report lists non-aviation terminal revenue of \$142,353. This revenue is paid for use of the airport from not only the South Shore, but also from Greyhound, Coach USA and other vendors such as the rental car companies. The payments from each are not specified.

The South Shore and the Chamber have an obligation to taxpayers, to the South Bend council, to the Ardmere residents and to the public at large, to be transparent and to involve stakeholders in their planning.

Rea said he was recently in Washington, D.C., and feared that “this latest uncertainty could impact our ability to tap into federal funds.” Yes, nobody wants confusion and

controversy to threaten federal government money that would finance the “double-tracking” in the Michigan City area and provide the major reduction in commuting time.

But the responsibility for the controversy now belongs to the South Shore and the Chamber. The community has come up with a reasonable plan to shorten the commute, to preserve homes in the Ardmore neighborhood and to save taxpayer money. It is time now for the South Shore and the Chamber to get on board.

Marty Wolfson lives in South Bend.