

NEW BUFFALO

High-speed rail service to the city seems to be a lost cause for now

Meanwhile, regular service continues on the GR-Chicago route

By RAY GUDAS

For The Herald-Palladium
NEW BUFFALO — Demands by Amtrak officials appear to have derailed plans to bring high-speed rail service to the city, at least for the foreseeable future.

City Attorney Harold Schuitmaker explained that, while considerable progress has been made during lease negotiations with Amtrak over the last six months, the publicly funded company continues to insist on several provisions that are, in the words of Mayor Bob Westergren, “deal breakers” as far as the city is concerned. Among them is that Amtrak wants the city to assume legal responsibility for, as Schuitmaker phrased it, “anything that happens in the vicinity of the station” – including, he said, injuries that might be caused by a train derailment, however unlikely that may be.

The attorney characterized that requirement as both “unfair” and “stupid.”

airports.

Schuitmaker said that was “too big of an unknown” for the city to blindly agree to, and he recommended against it.

“They want us to assume all the liability without any consideration in return,” he said. The attorney stopped short of suggesting that the city give up on the effort, though he did offer the opinion that the last meeting he had with Amtrak officials was “a waste of time.”

“They weren’t prepared to do anything,” he said.

Westergren reported that developer Jimmy Gierczyk told him during a phone conversation that he is still committed to doing whatever he can to make the Amtrak stop a reality, even though he would not be involved in its construction.

Illinois-based Carlson Brothers Construction, which purchased Gierczyk’s Fountain Square project last year, agreed to build the rail platform as part of the terms of that deal, though there has been no activity at the site for many months.

Last fall, representatives of Carlson Brothers told the City Council that they expected to resume the Fountain Square project in February.

New Buffalo now receives Amtrak service on the Grand Rapids to Chicago route.

It hopes to become part of the high-speed Detroit to Chicago line, which is expected to

Amtrak also wants the city to maintain and service the new train platform that would be built along Oselka Drive adjacent to Whittaker Street.

By the company's definition, that would include paying for and staffing a passenger-screening facility should that ever become a requirement, as it is at the nation's

eventually be upgraded to speeds topping 100 mph.

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