

How a plastics company's interest in the William Stanley Business Park could improve rail access

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By Tony Dobrowolski

PITTSFIELD — It served an important purpose years ago, but lately the railroad siding that connects part of the William Stanley Business Park of the Berkshires to the nearby CSX rail tracks has fallen into disrepair.

It needs a new switch, cross lines and ties "to bring it up today's standards," said Cory Thurston, the executive director of the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority, the quasi-public agency responsible for the 52-acre business park's development.

A siding is a low-speed spur off a main rail line typically used for loading and unloading, including at industrial sites.

This siding, another remnant of Pittsfield's industrial past, could be the deciding factor in maybe, just maybe, bringing at least 100 new manufacturing jobs to Pittsfield.

A plastics manufacturer from the Orlando, Fla. area with ties to the Berkshires has expressed an interest in building a facility at the Stanley Business Park, and is interested in having that rail siding restored.

Nothing has been determined yet.

"I don't even know if there are any real direct negotiations going on," Thurston said in January. But he said this company would bring in "well over 100 jobs" if it chose to build in the Stanley Business Park.

State and city officials have declined to identify the manufacturer. PEDA officials referred to the proposal only as "Project 40" for several months, because it would be located in an area of the park that once housed the 40s complex of buildings at General Electric's former Pittsfield operations.

Two of those former structures, buildings 42 and 43, made up one of the largest industrial spaces in Western Massachusetts when they were built over 100 years ago, according to Eagle files. Building 44 was also part of that complex. Unlike other areas in the park, the foundation that housed all three of those structures, located just to the west of the Woodlawn Avenue railroad bridge, is intact and massive. That area is now known as buildings sites 7 and 8 in the Stanley Business Park

The Stanley Business Park's proximity to a major rail freight line has been touted as a plus ever since PEDA was created in 1998, but this is the first time a serious attempt to actually restore the connection has been explored.

PEDA, with the help of Knowledge Corridor Services, a rail freight consultant agency, recently applied for an \$850,000 matching grant through a state program to determine how much reconnecting the site to the CSX rail line will cost.

"We want to improve the siding connections to that site and this is the way to get the money to pay for that," Thurston said recently. "At some juncture, whether it's today or tomorrow, having rail access at that site is going to be a high priority."

PEDA has applied for the funding through the Industrial Rail Access Program administered by MassDOT. Created by the state Legislature in 2012, IRAP is a public/private partnership that provides financial assistance to eligible applicants prepared to invest in industry-based rail infrastructure access improvement projects located on, within or adjacent to the state's freight rail transportation network. The CSX Railroad tracks run through the Stanley Business Park

If PEDA is successful, the agency would receive \$500,000 from the state, and would have to "match" the additional \$350,000, possibly from the organization's own funds. PEDA should learn the status of its application by mid-April, Thurston said. But even if PEDA's application is successful, there are no guarantees that this manufacturer will come to Pittsfield

"Now, we doubt very much that we're going to get a state grant without locking up the manufacturer so we probably won't be improving (that siding) any time soon unless the manufacturer decides to come, so it's kind of a chicken and egg scenario," Thurston said. "You've got to play the cards and see where they fall."

Going through the grant process will give PEDA an idea of how much it will cost to directly connect the business park to the rail line.

"We'll know the costs because we will have gone through enough steps," he said. "We can provide rail access should we get a prospect that wants it. So, either way it's not a waste of money in my opinion to have that knowledge base and the facts about what's required in the costs. It's short money now."

Knowledge Corridor Services is made up mostly of recently retired railroad industry executives who have several decades of experience in the rail business, including operations, construction and planning, according to managing director and co-founder Zane Lumelsky, who is based in the Pioneer Valley. The group has prepared presentations for several rail lines, including CSX.

The Stanley Business Park's proximity to a major rail line is a plus, he said.

"I really want to emphasize that Pittsfield is extremely well positioned because this is a major rail line," Lumelsky said. "If there's a business, probably industrial, that needs to ship by rail this site gives them everything."

There was also rail access to the buildings that formerly made up GEs 30s complex, including switches and three different lines in the vicinity of the recently reopened Woodlawn Avenue railroad bridge, Thurston said. But "those are all dug up and buried," Thurston said, "The Berkshire Innovation Center is going in there. All of that's pretty much gone."

"For now, we're exploring this site," said Thurston, referring to the siding that led to Building 44. "What we're looking to do is resurrect that."

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