

Aldermen approve streetcar but final vote delayed

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The Milwaukee Common Council voted today in favor of building the \$124 million downtown streetcar project, but opponents of the plan used a parliamentary procedure maneuver to delay the final vote until Feb. 10.

In the meantime, streetcar opponents will continue a petition drive in an attempt to use direct legislation to establish a law that would require voter approval for any rail project in Milwaukee that costs more than \$20 million.

The Common Council voted 10-5 today in favor of the streetcar project. However, one of those votes was cast by streetcar opponent Tony Zielinski, who did so in order to be able to then move to reconsider the matter until the Feb. 10 meeting. Only three aldermen are needed to support the delay until the next meeting.

Joe Davis Sr., James Bohl Jr., Robert Donovan, Robert Puente and Joe Dudzik voted against the streetcar proposal. With Zielinski that means six of the 15 aldermen oppose the project.

The nine aldermen who voted to support the project today were: Ashanti Hamilton, Nik Kovac, Robert Bauman, Milele Coggs, Willie Wade, Michael Murphy, Jose Perez, Terry Witkowski and Russell Stamper II.

Although he voted for the streetcar, Murphy also voted in favor of the delay saying that residents deserved the chance to have more time to gather signatures on petitions that oppose the project.

“Citizens will certainly have an opportunity to express their view in that time period,” he said. “The streetcar is not the second coming, it isn’t. At the same time, the opponents who indicate this is the worst thing since Ebola, that isn’t fair either. Yes, there is risk. There is risk in anything in life...I will support this project with reservations.”

Strong supporters of the streetcar said it will help attract economic development that will boost the city’s tax base and create jobs.

“I think this is the time for the council to have vision,” Witkowski said.

Opponents said the streetcar project is a waste of money at a time the city has a lack of funds to serve more important needs. The project lacks public support, they said.

“The supporters see something I just don’t and a lot of people just don’t,” Donovan said. “Wherever I go, people just shake their heads wondering why we are pursuing this.”

The petition drive against the streetcar project, which began early this month, is being led by Davis and Donovan and is organized by the CRG Network. Chris Kliesmet, executive administrator of the CRG Network, said he is not sure how many signatures have been collected so far.

“We are trying to figure that out right now,” he said.

The streetcar opponents need to gather 31,000 signatures. If they do so the Common Council could either approve the law sought by the petition drive, to require a referendum for rail projects in the city that cost more than \$20 million, or hold a referendum asking voters if there should be a law that requires referendums for rail projects costing more than \$20 million.

Kliesmet says his group believes that the petitions need to be turned in to the City Clerk’s office before the Feb. 10 meeting. The City Clerk must review the signatures to verify that they are valid and then the Common Council must take action.

By then the Common Council could have already approved the streetcar project. But if petitions are submitted and the Common Council still moves forward with the streetcar project before a referendum is held CRG Network will file a lawsuit seeking an injunction to block the project, Kliesmet said.

“My guess is this will be litigated no matter what,” he said.

The City Attorney’s office said it has not issued an opinion yet on whether or not the Common Council can approve and move forward with the streetcar project if petitions seeking a referendum are submitted before the Feb. 10 meeting.

Kliesmet said there is “lots of encouraging anecdotal data,” but it “is going to be a challenge,” to get 31,000 signatures on petitions by Feb. 10.

“Everybody knows if it goes to referendum it will not pass,” he said.

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