

Berkshire financial institutions to create incentive for rail car builder

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Posted:

BerkshireEagle.com

PITTSFIELD -- A potential transit rail car manufacturer now has three good reasons to build Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority vehicles in the Berkshires.

Four of the county's leading financial institutions -- Berkshire Bank, the Greylock Federal Credit Union, MountainOne Bank and the Pittsfield Cooperative Bank -- have offered to pool their resources to create a competitive financing package to attract a rail car manufacturer.

"It's a pledge to work together," said John Bissell, Greylock's executive vice president. "As the project develops we would know which site they're talking about, who the company is and what their needs are. Any loan program that we would put together would have to meet all of those needs.

"These opportunities don't come along often," he said. "We want to increase the odds as much as we possibly can."

Berkshire County is one of several areas in the state that have expressed an interest in being the site for a manufacturer to build 226 vehicles for the MBTA's Orange and Red lines, with an option to construct 58 additional Red Line cars.

The \$1 billion contract stipulates that final assembly of those vehicles has to take place somewhere in Massachusetts. Officials have said the project could bring between 200 and 250 jobs to the Berkshires depending on the amount of work that needs to be performed here.

The two other Berkshire County financial incentives, separate \$1 million pledges by both the city of Pittsfield and the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority, are being offered to any manufacturer that is specifically interested in locating at the William Stanley Business Park of the Berkshires in Pittsfield. The pledge from the four financial institutions is available to any manufacturer willing to consider any of the four Berkshire sites.

The three other sites are the Renfrew Center Building in Adams, the former Beloit-Jones facility in Ashuelot Park in Dalton, and the former Schweitzer-Mauduit Greylock Mill in Lee.

The new package was developed following a discussion initiated by Pittsfield Mayor Daniel L. Bianchi.

"Anything we can do to create an edge over any other community for the railcar project we want to do," Bianchi said.

The specific details of the proposal haven't been worked out, because the state has yet to choose a manufacturer. The deadline for manufacturers to submit Request for Proposals, or RFPs, for the project was recently extended from May 1 to May 15.

Berkshire financial institutions provided funding to purchase tax exempt bonds during the restoration of the Colonial Theater, and loans towards to the construction of the Beacon Cinema. But this is the first time they've come together to make an offer as a group, according to Pittsfield Cooperative Bank President Jay

Anderson.

"I think it sends the right public message that despite the fact that we compete against each other, we all come together when it comes to economic development in the Berkshires," he said.

Between and eight and nine manufacturers are expected to bid on the project. Four rail car manufacturers have officially visited the Berkshires. At least one has been described by local officials as a "serious contender" to set up a facility here.

Manufacturers are required to list the site where they intend to locate their assembly plant on their RFPs, but officials say they are allowed to list more than one location.

One manufacturer, Changchun Rail Vehicles of China, has already committed to a site in Springfield.

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