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BNSF expansion may help Topeka

By Mike Hall

Development of a \$200 million BNSF Railway facility in Gardner - southwest of metropolitan Kansas City - will benefit the company's operation in Topeka, not harm it, railroad and Greater Topeka Chamber of Commerce officials say.

Steve Forsberg, BNSF general director for public affairs, said Thursday "it is absolutely not true" that the Gardner facility would take railroad jobs from Topeka. If anything, the Gardner development would bolster the railroad's support jobs in the capital city, he said.

Gardner is just southwest of the greater Kansas City area on Interstate 35. Forsberg said the site was chosen because of its access to the railroad tracks and the interstate. The facility will create an improved system for unloading freight, mainly intermodal freight containers, into warehouses and onto trucks and vice versa.

The railroad initially announced plans to acquire 1,000 acres, but so far has acquired only 800, Forsberg said.

He said the distribution center would represent a \$650 million investment when fully built over 20 years. The entire facility will create 13,000 jobs in the state over that same period. About 12,000 of the jobs will be in the Johnson County area, including 7,500 in Gardner.

In announcing his candidacy for the Topeka City Council on Jan. 23, Joaquin Padilla said residents of the 2nd Council District were concerned about crime and the loss of Topeka jobs to the BNSF facility being developed at Gardner.

On Thursday, Padilla said his statement wasn't intended to imply that existing jobs in Topeka would be moved to Gardner. He was merely criticizing Councilman John Alcalá, who represents the 2nd Council District, and other city leaders for not trying harder to win the BNSF facility for Topeka.

Forsberg said the function of the Gardner facility won't duplicate anything the railroad is doing in Topeka.

Doug Kinsinger, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Topeka Chamber of Commerce, agreed.

Kinsinger said the Topeka chamber has adopted a statement in support of the Gardner facility.

"The more BNSF grows, the more our jobs will grow," he said.

Kinsinger said locomotive repair being done in the Topeka shops in the past few years has nearly doubled as the railroad increases the amount of freight it hauls.

The railroad originally had hoped to have the intermodal Gardner operation running before the end of 2008. But on Thursday Forsberg said, "I don't know whether or not that is going to hold."

He said a number of entities are involved in studies of what needs to be done to make the project work.

Forsberg said the railroad had hired the Allen Group, of San Diego, to handle most of the development details.

He said talks are under way with the Kansas Department of Transportation and the city of Gardner over access roads from I-35 into the site and possibly a new interchange with I-35.