

An Honest Discussion about Transportation Needs

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As roads and bridges continue to deteriorate, former DOT Sec. Gottlieb presented a comprehensive long-term transportation funding solution that was rejected by Governor Walker. Sen. Kathleen Vinehout takes it to build an alternative state budget that provides solutions, not continued borrowing.

MADISON - Farmers in western Wisconsin are worried new bridge weight limits will add time and cost to their already stressful lives.

"This is a very serious concern for us," Farm Bureau spokesman Rob Richard told Chris Hubbuch of the La Crosse Tribune. "We want to make sure farmers can get to and from their fields. If they can't make the quickest, most efficient route they're just adding wear and tear to other roads."

The Department of Transportation recently lowered the weight limit on 184 bridges, mostly in western Wisconsin. This action met a 2018 federal deadline requiring a state evaluation of bridges.

Engineers looked at what is known as short-haul vehicles. These are vehicles defined by the feds as “closely spaced, multi-axle, single unit” trucks like dump trucks, milk trucks and manure hauling tankers. The vehicles have closely spaced axles that “concentrate weight in a much smaller footprint”, which can put more stress on, and possible damage to, the bridges.



Local bridges were low on the Governor's spending priority list. In his first budget, the Governor cut money to local bridges by over 8% compared to the prior (Recession) budget, then provided no increase in the next four years. This year, his election year budget did provide new bridge funds.

Perhaps budget cuts are partly to blame for the results of a recent study by the American Society of Civil Engineers that reported Wisconsin has over 1,200 structurally deficit bridges.

The same study reported 27% of roads in Wisconsin are in poor condition. Motorists pay an average of \$637 per year on vehicle repairs due to roads in need of repair.

“Our roads are all junk,” farmer Clint Sampson was quoted in the La Crosse Tribune story. “These county roads are worn out. The roads haven’t been touched for 30 years. Some of them are beyond patching up.”

Perhaps this is why county officials tell me they have turned asphalt roads into gravel for years.

The underfunding of roads comes in spite of several studies showing a decline in road

conditions and a shortfall in state resources, just to maintain current conditions. For example, the 2014 Commission on Transportation Finance and Policy found, without additional highway funding, 42% of Wisconsin roads will be in poor or worse condition by 2023. The 2016, the study No Easy Answers found rural roads are twice as deadly as other roads in Wisconsin and more than twice as deadly as the national average.

I learned a great deal by reading the budgets of former Department of Transportation (DOT) Secretary Mark Gottlieb. Many of the ideas I used in my Alternative Budgets came from these documents, especially his 2015-17 budget request submitted in November of 2014. In this document, Mr. Gottlieb included 24 issue papers discussing solutions to the crisis facing DOT.

Reporter Katelyn Ferral of the Capitol Times recently interviewed the former Secretary. In the interview, former Secretary Gottlieb talked about how the Governor signaled that in 2016, Gottlieb should not submit another budget that “contained a comprehensive solution.”



“I think it was done because they didn’t want a repeat of what was done in 2014. They didn’t want the department to submit a budget that seriously dealt with this issue.” Instead, the administration wanted a budget that “pretended if we just went along like we were going along, everything would be fine. ... That is not the budget I would have submitted based on my judgement of what was needed.”

“We got to the place where the facts were being ignored in favor of political spin”, former Secretary Gottlieb continued. “It is easy enough to evaluate statements about how much the state is investing or not investing by looking at historical budget data. We are not investing.”

Looking at state transportation budgets, one can see that Walker chose borrowing more money over developing a long-term transportation funding solution.

Potholes are real. Deteriorating bridges are real. Wrecked axles and other unexpected repairs are real. I agree with former Secretary Gottlieb, it's time we have an honest conversation about how to fix transportation.

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