

New Transportation Ideas Needed to Handle More Intense Storms

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Tuesday, 06 December 2016 11:05

<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/flood-wi-road-s5.jpg>



Local residents are facing increased damage to roads and bridges from recent floods. Rainfall intensity in Wisconsin is increasing, and the state should consider building structures, like bridges, to accommodate more intense weather.

ALMA, WI - Winter came to Buffalo County. The weather turned to snow and then to ice.

In our hilly part of the world, rural people are used to finding new ways out of the valleys during bad weather. However, for residents living in Schoepps Valley (pronounced “Sheps”) the usual way out is not an option.

The story began early August 11, 2016 when torrential rains dumped up to 11 ½ inches in our area. Small creeks became raging rivers. Wild water took out several bridges including the Schoepps Valley Bridge that connects a major road –State Highway 88 – to about 20 homes and farms.

Recovery from the floods is slow and wearisome. Some residents just recently were able to apply for assistance. Town officials borrowed money to fix roads and bridges, and the county may need to borrow for cleanup of a debris-filled creek that still threatens homes.

But for resident in Schoepps Valley, the bridge is still out.

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Town officials cannot yet get funding from the state Department of Transportation to pay for a temporary bridge. Getting a new larger sized permanent bridge will take some time. Meanwhile, people are worried about getting to work. Some fear being stranded and sometimes stay with relatives in Winona, Minnesota.

Without a new bridge, the only way out of the valley is a steep, windy road that becomes impassable during bad weather.

“The milk truck went off the dugway,” Cheryl told me. She lives on a dairy farm at the bottom of what we call a dugway – a road dug out of a hill. “The road was blocked for five hours. People missed work. No one could come or go.”

One neighbor had so much trouble getting to work over so many days that she changed her job. “I worry what might happen in an emergency,” Cheryl said.

I also heard from Jason, who milks dairy goats.

“Yesterday the dugway wasn’t plowed till 2 pm,” he told me. “We really need a temporary bridge.”

Jason lives in town but keeps his goats at a family farm in the valley. He travels twice a day to care for the goats. Without the bridge, his trip is much longer. In bad weather, he has a hard time getting to his animals.

No one I spoke with can remember a storm like the one last August. Damage to the bridge in Schoepps Valley was so great that it not only must be replaced, it will require a wider structure to withstand potential flooding.

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Recently I spoke with Professor Randy Lehr who heads up the Burke Center for Freshwater Innovation at Northland College in Ashland. He told me “rainfall intensity” is increasing in Wisconsin. “It’s raining harder,” Dr. Lehr said. “Culverts are too small.” Too small to handle the intense rain.

Dr. Lehr shared with me a map of Wisconsin with the areas of greatest rainfall intensity marked in darker green. Ashland was the center of the darkest green – an area that recently experienced intense storms. All along the Mississippi River, from St. Paul to the Illinois-Iowa border, western Wisconsin was identified on the map as an area prone to increasing storm intensity.

“Whenever we rebuild, we should rebuild to accommodate future storms,” Dr. Lehr told me. “Our state policy going forward should be to allow for more effective use of public money to prepare for coming storms.”

Yet getting resources to build even a temporary structure, to allow work to be done on a larger bridge, seems to be very slow.

How do we plan for changes in weather patterns? How do we change our state policies to protect our rural residents?

No one likes to travel dangerous, icy roads. Town officials want the resources to build safe temporary structures even as they work to get the money to build the larger bridge needed to withstand the ravages of more intense storms.

It seems to me conditions on the ground are changing faster than the state’s ability to change its rules.

In the next few weeks, I will be meeting with state officials to ask these questions and more. If you have concerns about our roads, bridges and coming floods, please share your concerns. You can reach my office by phone [877-763-6636](tel:877-763-6636) or at Sen.Vinehout@legis.wisconsin.gov . Your voice really matters.

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