State Government: Transit for Our Future

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Senator Smith explores Wisconsin's future mass transit needs and the importance of local decision making. Better funding sources are needed so we can make the necessary investments.

MADISON - Summer travel season is in full swing. During this busy time, families are crisscrossing through Wisconsin squeezing in those final summer vacations before kids go back to school. Summer is also construction season, causing headaches for everyone trying to get to and from our summer fun.

It seems like we just can't catch up on road construction, especially on our county and town roads. Fewer and fewer of our tax dollars are returning to our local governments in the form of road aids. It's been especially difficult for local municipalities to repair and rebuild roads in our communities.

When we make our travel plans, what are the options? Usually we drive to our destination in Wisconsin or fly to some other state or country. When visiting other places, I'm sure you've noticed other travel options such as bus or passenger rail. Travel, like everything else, is always

evolving. As we discover how expensive and difficult it is to keep up with road repairs, maybe we should get serious about mass transit options.

Supporting alternative travel methods will become more important whether we are traveling within our cities, to other counties or across our state.

Just think, if you plan to spend a day with the family in Wisconsin Dells or Door County; wouldn't it be great if you and your family could jump on a train, bypass the traffic, get there safely and actually enjoy the ride? And what if we could connect travelers to towns along the Mississippi River or all the lakes up north? We could explore without the hassle and have a greater opportunity to enjoy the wonders of Wisconsin. Imagine the economic benefits as well. Now, I realize connecting all corners of the state may be a dream at this point, but you can't accomplish great things if you don't start dreaming.

Like a garden, we need to plant the seeds, then carefully nurture what we plant until they reach their full potential. That's why I strongly believe local transit decisions create strong roots for our state's transportation system to flourish.

If state legislators allowed municipalities to make transit decisions based on their local needs, we would be much further along in meeting the needs of our state as a whole. That's why I introduced the Chippewa Valley Regional Transit Authority (RTA) idea during the 2009 state budget.

The law allowed local elected officials to design transportation systems to move people throughout the region, including between counties. Chippewa and Eau Claire counties passed the required referendum and appointed their members to the Authority.

In 2011, Republicans repealed the law and stripped our local officials of their power to handle regional transportation planning. Republicans pulled the plug while regional leaders were developing solutions to our local transit challenges.

In the near future, I'll be reintroducing the Chippewa Valley RTA bill. It was a great idea the first

time it passed, and it's a great idea now. Local governments are better stewards of the public's trust and they fully understand their unique challenges and how to set their priorities.

It all boils down to funding. Mass transit investments are hard to come by while we scramble to address the transportation funding crisis. The budget is signed into law now and people can thank Governor Tony Evers for finally taking a step in the right direction for addressing the revenue shortfall and our unsustainable debt. Under Republican leadership, we paid nearly 20 cents of every dollar to debt. Now, we will be paying 18.5 cents per dollar.

Unfortunately, Republicans rejected Governor Evers' modest 8 cent gas tax increase which would've brought in revenue from out-of-state drivers. Instead, Republicans socked Wisconsin drivers (only) with vehicle title fee and registration fee increases. Balancing the road costs solely on the backs of Wisconsin drivers is wrong, especially considering most neighboring states increased their gas tax so we can pay for their roads too.

It's time to get off this do nothing treadmill. We need to capture out-of-state revenue for our roads, reign in our reliance on debt and move mass transit options ahead.

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