

Ideas proposed for funding state's transportation future

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POLICY CHANGES and financing options to help Wisconsin achieve effective investment in its transportation networks is the focus of a report released in January by a commission created in the last state budget. The Wisconsin Transportation Finance and Policy Commission examined ideas for funding the future of all modes of transportation in the state, including local road and bridge facilities.

The ten citizen members of the commission included former elected officials, engineers, individuals representing economic development organizations, shipping businesses, labor and agriculture, and a former secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. Current WisDOT Secretary Mark Gottlieb served as chair and a non-voting member.

Comparing scenarios

Martin Hanson, a commission member with experience working on WisDOT programs supporting local roads, is a professional engineer and Director of Transportation Relations for Ayres Associates in Eau Claire. Hanson says the commission looked at existing funding levels and the current condition of transportation networks in the state as a basis for analyzing future options.

They worked from this and other data to compare different scenarios for meeting Wisconsin's transportation needs over the next ten years. In their report, the commission recommended a scenario that allows maintenance and operations to keep pace with those needs. This approach maintains the existing condition of roads and bridges, improves safety and provides for improvements. To compensate for declining revenues and fund this initiative, they outlined strategies that include raising the state gas tax, a new mileage-based fee and vehicle registrations fees.



Commission members rejected an alternative that preserves the status quo and holds expenditures at current levels. They suggested this approach would reduce the state's purchasing power and cause serious deterioration of roads, bridges and other infrastructure.

"Our recommendation to fund the system at slightly higher than current levels reflects how much the state depends on transportation to get people to their jobs, to school and move commerce on that system," Hanson observes. "We also looked for solutions to increase revenue that are realistic and balanced, and that support both economic growth and public safety."

Impact on local roads

Details in the report explore several finance and policy issues that affect management of local roads. The commission called for budgeting an additional \$40 million for the Local Roads Improvement Program, an approach Hanson says directs more dollars to capital improvements Wisconsin's local road agencies determine are important.

Also on the funding front, the commission recommended the state adjust the administration of General Transportation Aids (GTA) to reimburse for transportation-related purposes only—road

reconstruction, rehabilitation and maintenance. Hanson adds that they thought it imperative the department include local officials in discussions about revising and simplifying the GTA formula.

Speeding project delivery and reducing the cost of meeting financial and administrative requirements prompted another policy recommendation that would eliminate federal funds from local road improvement programs. The report states that replacing those dollars with state funds and the multi-layered federal process with state oversight makes sense for straightforward local projects.

Hanson notes that a commission recommendation to require qualifications-based selection of engineers on all local transportation projects is intended to ensure that, even with more streamlined management, they are backed by a level of professional skill and experience for determining construction costs and other functional details during the life of the project.

Wider review

Local road officials can go to <http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/about/tfpl/index.htm> to download and read the complete report. Hanson observes that while the commission's role is advisory, its recommendations will benefit from wider review of the report by the public and by transportation professionals responsible for the roads, bridges and other facilities that keep Wisconsin moving.

"The current state budget proposal does not include many of the key recommendations, but these ideas deserve consideration and I encourage local public officials to discuss them with their elected officials and others," says Hanson. "Over time, commission members hope to see many of them adopted and put into practice." ■

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Resource

<http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/about/tfpl/index.htm>

Link to download of *Keep Wisconsin Moving: Smart Investments, Measurable Results*, the Transportation Finance and Policy Commission report.