Exceeding the Limit
A Case for Urgent Reform of Wisconsin’s Transportation System
Wisconsin’s Department of Transportation, has varying degrees of authority over different transportation modes – from roads, to public transit, airports and rail. However, most of the department’s revenues are sunk into the state highway system, as shown in the illustration below.

Years of over-investing in new highways, at the expense of other modes have left the state with hundreds of thousands of miles of crumbling roadway infrastructure.

Wisconsin’s pattern of spending on transportation has become increasingly unsustainable. The Governor appointed Commission on Transportation Finance and Policy predicted that the state transportation fund could face a shortfall of up to $17.1 billion over the next ten years.¹

“Today’s revenues show that Wisconsin cannot even maintain current conditions for transportation in the future.”

Wisconsin Transportation and Finance Commission
In spite of these tough financial circumstances, the Department of Transportation proceeded with a “business as usual” method of operation, with over half a billion dollars being allocated for new highway construction and reconstruction in 2013.²

Revenues from the state motor-fuel tax are at an all-time low. This is due to a combination of factors. First, more efficient cars are able to travel longer distances on a single tank of gas, causing less fuel to be sold each year, with consequent reductions into the state transportation fund. Next, we are also seeing several unprecedented changes in how Wisconsinites are choosing to travel. Vehicle miles driven in the state have been down consecutively for eight straight years.³ In light of this new data, it’s clear that we cannot maintain the status-quo of funding highways above all else.

It is time to envision, plan and design a new system of transportation that is more inclusive, and gives citizens transportation choice, instead of being restricted to driving a car.
Keeping in line with the rest of the nation, Wisconsinites are driving less each year. For the first time in history, vehicle miles driven have fallen for nearly a decade. Data from the Wisconsin Department of Transportation shows that VMT in the state hit a peak in 2004, and has since flattened out. The average Wisconsinite drove 500 fewer miles in 2011 than in 2004.4

In addition, two of Wisconsin’s largest urbanized areas are showing the greatest decreases in per-capita driving in the country. In a new report released by US Public Interest Research Group, Milwaukee and Madison ranked two and three respectively, in terms of greatest VMT reduction per-capita in the country between 2006 and 2011.6

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National data shows that young people are delaying applying for a license and fewer young people overall are opting to even get one. Let’s look at the change in how many young people held drivers licenses in the last two national censuses in Wisconsin. Between 2000 and 2010, the total number of young people (16-34 year olds) in Wisconsin increased by two percent. In 2000, 81% of all people in the age group held a valid driver’s license. In 2010, that number decreased to 79% – a decrease of over two percent.
Cities which have invested in bicycling infrastructure are seeing substantial ridership improvement. For example, Madison has had an 88% increase in bicycle commuters over the last eight years, since the city released a plan to achieve a platinum rating for biking.\(^7\) Sheboygan County reported a 43% increase in daily non-recreational biking trips in just one year since the creation of a federally funded pilot program which aimed to connect the county’s bike and pedestrian network with schools, businesses and other destinations.\(^8\) Milwaukee County has seen bicycle use up 107% over the last ten years.\(^9\) The 2010 American Community Survey showed that .75% of all Wisconsin commuters use bicycles to get to work, which is 50% greater than the national average.\(^10\)

Spending decisions made by the state on the transportation system do not reflect these demographic changes. The state continues to fund highway expansion at the expense of almost all else – which is creating a one-dimensional transportation network that is detrimental to the health and vitality of many Wisconsin communities.

WisDOT spending decisions DO NOT reflect changing demographics

![Graph showing percentage change in spending since 2000 for highways, transit, and local roads](image-url)
In 2011, Wisconsin cut transit funding by 10% - about $15 million, forcing transit operators to cut several routes and even putting some in danger of completely shutting down, while at the same time spending $1.9 billion on widening 35 miles of Interstate 94 from the Illinois border to Milwaukee by one lane in each direction and reconstructing interchanges.\textsuperscript{13}

The final cost of the projects is still unknown and the state could end up spending over $7 billion at the time of completion.\textsuperscript{12} In addition, these are up-front costs and do not include associated maintenance and rehabilitation costs.
WisDOT has proposed double decking 2.85 miles of I-94 through the historic Story Hill neighborhood in Milwaukee at a staggering cost of nearly $2 billion dollars – in spite of stiff opposition from area residents and local Milwaukee officials who are concerned about the cost and negative impacts to the neighborhood.14

2.85 miles = $2,000,000,000

WisDOT has also been reducing the amount reimbursed to local communities for their transportation networks. Reimbursements to local communities have gone down by 20% over the last decade.15 This has forced local communities to increase property taxes to pay for routine maintenance and preservation work – and in some cases leaving local roads in dangerous driving conditions.16
Transit ridership in Wisconsin has been a mixed-bag. Madison has seen ridership thrive, with 2011 hitting an all-time high. Milwaukee has seen ridership fall by over 10 million annually since 2009 due to substantial cuts in state aids. Ridership on other Wisconsin systems have remained fairly constant.

Transit Trips - Madison and Milwaukee

Transit Trips - Wisconsin Cities
The City of Madison, has invested in multimodal transportation, and has seen record ridership increases on its transit system, along with all-time high bike and pedestrian mode shares. Nearly 45% more transit trips were taken on public transportation in Madison in 2011 than in 1997.17

"Next-generation projects will orient to infill, urbanizing suburbs, and transit-oriented development. Smaller housing units - close to mass transit, work, and 24-hour amenities - gain favor over large houses on big lots at the suburban edge. Shorter commutes make up for higher infill real estate costs."

Emerging trends in Real Estate, Urban Land Use Institute and PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2010

Other Wisconsin cities are also seeing all-time transit ridership demands. In La Crosse, annual transit ridership has risen from approximately 750,000 trips in 1997 to 1.3 million in 2012.18

According to the Wisconsin Commission on Transportation Finance and Policy, between 2007 and 2011 statewide ridership on “Tier C” transit systems with populations less than 50,000 rose. For example, at Bay Area Rapid Transit on the shores of Lake Superior, year on year ridership was up 11 percent in 2010, 21% in 2011. 19

These ridership numbers are indicative of how investments have been prioritized in these cities. Milwaukee has seen significant and persistent cuts to its transit system since 2009, with over $6.8 million cut in the 2011 legislative session alone.20 The transit system also increased fares by 29% in 2006-2011.21 Simultaneously, the city has invested heavily into expanding capacity on its urban roadway system – at a time when Milwaukee has seen some of the greatest driving decreases in the nation.

This systematic disinvestment in the transit system has contributed to a 21% decrease in Milwaukee transit ridership over the last five years.22 Studies estimate that nearly 40,000 jobs have been put out of reach to commuters over the last decade due to the elimination of routes.23
So how is the state paying for these ongoing roadway expansions? Data from Wisconsin’s historical budget trends document shows that bond funding has increased by 83% since 1998. Over the last ten years, the state has borrowed over $4.5 billion to pad the transportation fund. Debt service has increased by a staggering 307% since 1998.

WisDOT’s Burgeoning Debt

Debt Service as Percentage of Total Transportation Budget

The state borrowed nearly $1 billion for the 2013-14 legislative session alone, to pay for highway capacity expansion and rehabilitation projects. It is estimated that annual debt repayment will top $1.6 billion by the year 2020.

With debt service steadily creeping up to be a larger part of the total transportation budget each year – we are burdening future generations with repayment, for large scale infrastructure projects that data indicates is neither required, nor desired.

It is important to ensure that we are prioritizing our transportation investments correctly – and not potentially bankrupting the fund a few years down the road.

“Conventional wisdom suggests that we simply need to build more capacity. Adding lanes however will never fully solve the congestion problem. When new general purpose lanes are built, they immediately fill up. They may help compress rush hours slightly, but the congestion problem remains.”

Matthew Click, HNTB Corp.
Building a Better System

Recommendations for the Future

All of the data shows that we should rethink our investments in transportation. It’s time to focus on building a transportation system that is financially and environmentally sustainable, in addition to being multimodal and equitable for all users.

A. Re-evaluate major highway projects.

1. *Adapt to changing times* by collecting data about current and projected travel trends and create models that are more reflective of shifts in transportation and living preferences of Wisconsinites.

2. *Use real-time data* in the planning and design of new transportation systems – instead of outdated models that project indefinite future growth in automobile vehicle miles driven.

3. *Invest in asset management systems* that seek to maintain and preserve the existing roadway network and use innovative strategies to manage demand and congestion. For example, using congestion pricing on roads affected by peak-hour traffic jams, intelligent transportation systems that predict demand and inform users about alternate traffic routes, data driven analysis that allows the synchronization of different types of roadwork and technologically advanced incident management systems that allow the faster clearing of roadway networks following crashes. All of these options come at a much lower price-tag than new highway capacity.

4. *Use life-cycle cost analysis* that seek to capture the future maintenance and rehabilitation costs of new transportation infrastructure. These life-cycle costs would be tied to DOT budget requests, and future funding sources would be identified before projects are given the go-ahead.
B. Invest in complete streets, local roads, bike and pedestrian infrastructure

1. **Invest in a statewide complete streets program** that plugs the gaps in local road networks and allows the formation of a more efficient grid – that does not require local residents to use large highways for short trips.

2. **Increase funding for local road repairs** - they carry the majority of traffic in the state and are the first and last point in any trip taken.

3. **Equality in transportation modes** - pedestrians, transit, bikes and cars should be given equal priority in the design of local road networks.

4. **Invest in Safe Routes to School** - programs that encourage and protect children who use non-motorized modes of transportation to get to and from school.

C. Invest in high-quality public transportation in communities across Wisconsin

First step - implement the recommendations of the bipartisan Transportation Policy and Finance Commission:

1. **Restore the 10% cuts to public transit** operating assistance in 2011 and provide an additional $9.5 million in annual support.

2. **Allow communities to form Regional Transit Authorities** which are able to generate their own funding through the levy of a sales tax.

3. **Ensure that transit funding is secure** by allowing it to remain in the state Transportation Fund and prevent it from having to compete with other essential services like healthcare and education.

4. **Provide WisDOT with the administrative flexibility** to adjust transit tiers in accordance with changes in federal law that would allow agencies to allocate more funds to transit systems as appropriate.

5. **Create a state transit capital program** of $15 million annually or $150 million over ten years.
6. **Re-invest in commuter and high speed rail.** The proposed, but ultimately, discarded KRM (Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee) commuter rail project would have added eight new stops along existing freight rail lines and served nearly 2 million people. It would have been the terminus of the Milwaukee streetcar station, which is currently in the development phase.

A commuter and high speed rail network would be reflective of national transportation trends and provide commuters with a reliable and safe alternative to driving. These investments would also create jobs at a much higher rate than expanding highway capacity.
Sources

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