



DUEY STROEBEL

STATE SENATOR • 20TH DISTRICT

Below is a column penned by State Senator Duey Stroebel of Cedarburg for publication consideration. For more information, contact (608) 266-7513

Resisting the Call for a Higher Gas Tax

We all want good roads. Wisconsin's manufacturing, service, agriculture, and tourism industries require well maintained roads to allow for the free movement of goods and people. Where the agreement ends is how we go about paying for these improvements. Recently some have argued conservatives should embrace a gas tax increase. I, and many other conservative legislators, did not go to Madison to raise taxes. Before conservatives even consider any increased transportation funding, every last efficiency at the DOT must be identified and implemented and for no reason should we increase the overall tax burden on the taxpayers of Wisconsin.

As an initial matter, it's important to note Wisconsin's reputation as a high tax state. While Wisconsin has made great strides in the overall competitiveness of our tax climate since 2011, other states have similarly improved at a much faster pace. As a result, Wisconsin's [overall Tax Foundation ranking](#) has actually *fallen* two spots in the last three years to 43rd. We need to work aggressively to remove Wisconsin from the list of the ten *least* competitive states and raising the gas tax cannot be part of the equation.

Several key initiatives can be undertaken to address transportation concerns. First, the Legislature must await the release of the [already requested DOT audit](#). The audit will analyze potential improvements to DOT's planning, design, construction, and maintenance processes for the State Highway Program. It is anticipated that the audit will be completed and released this fall.

Additionally, two important reforms could be implemented to provide relief for transportation projects statewide. This session [I introduced a bill](#) that in the second half of the biennium would have replaced \$47 million in federal dollars with state dollars for local transportation projects and then re-allocated the federal dollars to mega projects. By removing federal dollars, local officials would not be required to comply with additional and unnecessary federal regulations and bureaucracy.

This is a common sense reform that previously received the full-throated support of road builders and their consultants. In January 2013 the [Wisconsin Transportation Finance and Policy Commission issued its Report](#) detailing "options to achieve a stable balance between transportation expenditures, revenues and debt service over the next decade." Among other things, the Commission recommended that "federal funds be removed from the local road programs ... and be replaced with state funds to reduce the cost, complexity and time associated with project delivery." It estimated the savings on delivery costs to be in the range of 25%.

In addition, the Legislature should work to implement full repeal of the prevailing wage requirement. While conservative reformers were successful during the budget process in removing the requirement for local units of government, the requirement remains for state projects. Removing the prevailing wage requirement for state projects would significantly reduce transportation costs.

Finally, as illustrated during the budget debate, simply forcing the DOT to prioritize transportation spending is a worthy, and achievable, goal. The Governor's proposed budget included \$1.3 billion in bonding for transportation projects. Many conservatives were not comfortable with that level of borrowing, and rightly so. By forcing the DOT's hand, the amount of borrowing was lowered to \$800 million. In order to do so, the DOT prioritized current transportation projects and identified those that required immediate funding. This was a difficult process. However, exaggerated traffic projections, over built roads and excessive roundabouts are all factors to review when prioritizing DOT spending.

As the Governor has suggested, unless we are able to find an offset in the budget elsewhere to provide for transportation funding, we will continue making the tough decisions. I'm committed to finding a long-term transportation solution. We all want good roads and the state of Wisconsin should play a key role in facilitating these projects. A standalone gas tax is simply not a mechanism I am willing to consider.

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