



It's how we get there

May 30, 2017

There is a noteworthy project going on right now to celebrate and, more importantly, learn from the fourteen-year term of Governor Tommy G. Thompson. The project called Tommy@30 includes an academic conference that was held on May 23rd in Madison, a gala on September 18th in Milwaukee, and a 90-minute documentary.

There is, of course, a lot of nostalgia and walks down memory lane that are a part of this effort, but there is also a tremendous amount of learning that can come from studying the term of the longest-serving governor in Wisconsin's history. Thirty years after Governor Thompson was first elected seems like an appropriate amount of time to be able to assess the effects of some of his signature policies. The academic portion of this effort should not be undersold.

As a person who advocates for sound transportation planning and policy, I was excited to hear about this project. Providing a transportation vision for Wisconsin was certainly one of the hallmarks of the Thompson administration.

Mobility 2000 was an ambitious plan for every mode of transportation in Wisconsin that a tremendously popular governor, beginning his second term, threw his energy and political capital behind. At the official unveiling of Mobility 2000 on April 20, 1991, Governor Thompson laid out his vision: "Today I am pleased to unveil a comprehensive initiative that addresses the transportation needs and challenges critical to Wisconsin's continued economic success."

A key component of Mobility 2000 was Thompson's plan to improve the highway connections under what he called Corridors 2020. The Governor went on, "This comprehensive approach to transportation began in 1988 when I proposed the Corridors 2020 initiative – the plan for a 3,400-mile network of upgraded quality highways connecting our economic center to global markets." This program also created the Local Road Improvement Program to assist local governments struggling to upgrade their roads.

Governor Thompson ultimately got his vision passed and implemented along with the funding to pay for it. The results of this incredible undertaking are well documented.

The Tommy@30 project is specifically concentrating on three signature issues: welfare reform, school choice reform and job creation. While transportation isn't specifically broken out, it is obvious an effective transportation plan is a building block for job creation.

Executive Director Craig Thompson

Between 1990-2001, 88% of all new and expanded manufacturing facilities chose to locate within five miles of a “Corridors 2020” highway.

Businesses knew what the plan was and under what schedule it was going to be implemented, and they responded. They located where they could efficiently move their products. They created jobs. And economies across Wisconsin flourished.

Today, Wisconsin desperately needs a transportation vision for the next thirty years. The level of uncertainty as a result of lurching from one transportation budget to the next is eroding gains made in other areas.

Governor Thompson was able to sell his vision to a legislature controlled by Democrats. Today, we have the same party controlling all three branches of government, and we can't seem to come to any agreement on a long-term vision for transportation. That needs to change.

It is time to set politics aside. The untapped opportunities a coherent transportation plan can unleash are just as great as they were in 1991. As Governor Thompson always declared, Wisconsin is still the place where “eagles soar and Harley's roar.”

Thank you, Governor Thompson. Let's take a page from this project and come together on a vision for Wisconsin's transportation network.

Craig Thompson
Executive Director