



Guest Column from Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke – June 14, 2016

Fixing Transportation Funding is the Conservative Choice

Over the last 5 ½ years, Republicans in the state legislature with the leadership of Governor Walker have been doing exactly what the voters sent us there to do. We have enacted reforms that have made your state government more efficient and more accountable to the taxpayers. We have also fulfilled our promise of focusing efforts to reduce the high burden of taxes here in Wisconsin. To that end, we have delivered billions in tax relief and billions more in savings.

In doing so, we have had to make difficult decisions in every budget to make ends meet and live within our means. We have forgone the usual politician's easy answer of growing government, ignoring waste and excess, and then expecting you as taxpayers to foot the bill. Instead, Governor Walker and the legislature has forced every agency in the state to take a hard look at their budgets and eliminate the fat within. We believe that every single tax dollar should be spent wisely, and that the citizens of Wisconsin don't resent paying taxes in general, but they do resent their hard earned dollars being spent foolishly.

So while we strive to lower the cost of state government as quickly as we can, we cannot allow that ideology to blind us to reality in cases where a lack of resources will cost taxpayers more in the end. This is the struggle we currently have with the Department of Transportation's budget.

It's been widely acknowledged that the transportation fund has faced a shortfall for a few years now, with estimates reaching over \$600 million per biennium. There are many reasons for this, most notably the \$1.3 billion that was raided from the fund during the Doyle administration to pay for ongoing expenses in other areas of the budget. These raids threw our infrastructure into disrepair, and created a hole from which we must now find a way out.

We have spent the last few years looking to find efficiencies in the DOT to cut back on unnecessary expenses. We've eliminated state taxpayer contributions toward decorative enhancements that cost millions, we've repealed the prevailing wage on local projects, and there will likely be legislation introduced again next year dubbed the "federal swap bill" to make that even more effective. We're auditing the DOT budget to look for further ways to reduce the budget and we're looking at state statutes for other reforms. In short, if it is going to save you money all options should be on the table.

Even with all of the potential savings we are still looking down the barrel of a shortfall that, according to the Secretary of the Department of Transportation, would delay road expansion work and upkeep of all but the state's most-traveled highways. This means that without increased funding, roads and bridges will continue to deteriorate. It also means that when we do finally get around to funding our infrastructure, it will cost us millions more in inflationary costs as well as increasing the amount of reconstruction needed.

So what's the answer? We could borrow more to cover the shortfall, but that's a tax on our kids. We could delay projects and maintenance, but that comes at a huge cost to economic development and to the long term health of our roads, which will also lead to tax and fee increases. Or we could do the fiscally responsible thing and fix the funding now so that we pay for our roads as we go, keeping them in good repair and lowering our long term costs.

Not one Republican in the Legislature relishes the idea of a tax or fee increase. But we also can't ignore the fact that taxes for infrastructure are already going up. Local units of government, due in part to stagnating support from the state, have instituted wheel taxes to fund local roads and some are even looking at going to referenda to plug the gap. This is not a choice between whether to broaden the base of revenue for infrastructure costs. It's a choice between doing it responsibly at the state level so everyone benefits (and visitors to our state also pay) or leaving it to our towns, cities and villages to make the tough decisions in a patchwork way that'll leave many out in the cold.

From 2010 until now, this Governor and Legislature have faced problems head on and dealt with them in the most fiscally responsible way we could. In Governor Walker's words, we have put "the next generation ahead of the next election." Going forward, I hope the Governor and my colleagues in the Legislature will join together and continue to prove that we are willing to do the right thing regardless of the consequences.