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More Investment in Railroads Will Reduce Highway Congestion, Pollution

By State Representative Don Vruwink

I was born on a farm in Central Wisconsin along the railroad tracks by U.S. Highway 10. On an hourly basis, we saw trains go by.

By the late 1960s, I began to see a decrease in train traffic. This is when the new interstate highway system was being completed.

As I graduated from high school and went to college, the use of the railroad appeared to decrease by half. When I was in college at UW-Stevens Point, gas wars put prices down to 15 cents per gallon. That seemed to further increase freight traffic on highways.

Today, the interstate system that we built in the '50s and '60s is overburdened and our railroads are underused.

The Wisconsin & Southern Railroad serves 200 customers, many of them in communities I represent: Whitewater, Milton, Edgerton, and Oregon.

As highway congestion increases across the state, I am advocating for a boost in our investment in railroads. Moving more freight off the highways and onto the rails will make our highways safer, reduce pollution, and boost the economy.

The Freight Railroad Preservation Program supports infrastructure upgrades for state-owned railroads. Right now, \$109 million in track, bridge and crossing projects remain unfunded and backlogged.

The current state budget allocates \$12 million for the freight rail preservation, which is a 65 percent reduction from the previous funding level of \$35 million. Last week, I joined eight of my legislative colleagues in asking the head of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation to designate \$20 million for track, bridge, and crossing improvements in the next state budget. This is a bipartisan effort.

Serving Dane, Jefferson, Rock, and Walworth Counties

I routinely travel Interstate I-90 and see firsthand the congestion and crashes caused by too many vehicles traveling in too little space. Excessive semi-truck traffic damages roads, increases air pollution, and results in lost productivity due to idling in traffic.

According to a University of Wisconsin Extension report, moving grain by rail is the most economical option for farmers. Trains can haul one ton of freight 480 miles on just one gallon of fuel. Reduced fuel consumption lowers shipping costs, saving money for farmers and manufacturers across Wisconsin.

Another obvious benefit of reducing highway congestion is increased safety for passenger vehicles.

To sustain economic growth, reduce highway congestion and improve public safety, I support boosting the state's investment in our freight rail system.

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