

Fix Interstates, Group Says

Road Organization Concerned About Deterioration

The Capital Times :: METRO :: B1

Thursday, June 8, 2006

By Anita Weier The Capital Times

Construction of Wisconsin's interstate highway system started 50 years ago, saving lives, time, fuel and costs of consumer goods. But those benefits will wear down as the interstate system does, a national organization warned today.

TRIP -- a Washington, D.C.-based group that researches highway issues -- came to the State Capitol to tout the benefits of the interstate system and call attention to its gradual deterioration.

The group is supported by equipment manufacturers and distributors, highway engineering and construction businesses, labor unions and others that benefit from highway construction.

Some of the report's points:

- Wisconsin's interstate system includes 1 percent of all roadway lane miles in the state, but carries 18 percent of all vehicle travel.
- Since 1956, total vehicle miles traveled in the state have increased by 349 percent to 60 billion miles in 2004. The number of vehicles has increased by 227 percent and the state's population rose by 47 percent.
- About one-third of Wisconsin's urban interstates are congested as a result of continued growth in travel, and travel on the interstates is expected to increase by 31 percent by 2026.
- Large commercial truck travel on Wisconsin's interstate highways is expected to increase by 65 percent by the year 2026, by which time large trucks will account for 24 percent of all interstate highway vehicle travel, the report predicted.
- Three percent of the state's interstate pavements are in poor condition and an additional 14 percent are in mediocre shape, while 27 percent are in fair condition and 56 percent in good shape.
- Eight percent of the state's interstate bridges are rated structurally deficient and 9 percent are rated functionally obsolete.

Wisconsin is served by four interstate routes totaling 743 miles. They include Interstates 39, 43, 90 and 94.

Reconstruction of Milwaukee's Marquette Interchange is already under way, at a cost of \$810 million, and that work will be followed by reconstruction of the Southeastern Wisconsin freeway system at a cost of \$5.9 billion. Additionally, 160 miles of rural interstates need to be widened, TRIP said.

Segments of rural interstates that need to be widened include 94 from Eau Claire to the Minnesota border, 94/90 from Tomah to Portage, 90 from Madison to Illinois and 94 from Madison to the Waukesha County line, the report said.

A TRIP executive, and Wisconsin transportation and industry leaders also appearing at a press conference this morning, had no definite figure for the dollar amount needed to keep traffic humming along -- other than "billions."

As for how to pay for the work, R.J. Pirlot of Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce said that dedicating at least part of a sales tax on automobiles and auto goods and services for use on roads might help. Currently money from a motor fuel tax and vehicle registration fees goes into the transportation fund.

The Legislature's recent decision to stop an automatic annual increase in the motor fuel tax left a big hole in transportation funding that has to be filled, Pirlot said, adding that state government's raids on the transportation fund for other purposes must stop.

"We cannot move forward under the assumption that the federal government is going to bail us out," said Bob Cook, executive director of the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin. "There has not been an increase in the federal gas tax since 1992 and the Federal Highway Trust Fund is running up against its limitations."

Interstates save lives because they have safety features other highways do not -- a separation from other roads and rail lines, a minimum of four lanes, gentler curves and often median barriers, paved shoulders and rumble strips to warn drivers they are leaving the roadway, the report said.

TRIP estimated Wisconsin's interstates have saved about 3,000 lives since 1956.