

Transportation Development Association



Issue Paper #5

Warning:
Traffic Congestion Ahead

*This is the fifth in a series of issue papers on key
transportation topics facing the state of Wisconsin*

Each day, products from around the world are packed into containers and shipped into United States ports. Containers are then trucked to intermodal facilities where they can be loaded onto trains or trucks for transport to markets across the country. After arriving at a regional distribution center or facility, the contents of the containers are then transferred to smaller trucks and delivered to the final customer by the highway. At every point in the above supply chain, congestion delay and other disruptions add cost for producers, transporters, sellers and consumers.

Similarly, people rely on the efficiency of Wisconsin's transportation system everyday in order to get to work, transport their children to school or events, enjoy recreational pursuits, or complete other personal errands.

An efficient highway system facilitates the cost effective movement of people and product. When highways exceed capacity, users waste time and money.

Staying ahead of the congestion problem

Nearly 2,300 miles of state highways or 20% of the 11,800-mile state highway system – which carries 60% of total travel, 75% of truck traffic and the vast majority of tourists - will become congested over the next 10 to 15 years. This is based on 1997 WisDOT long-range planning assumptions that underestimated travel increases and overestimated actual funding available for highway capacity projects. Unless the state provides funding for new lanes on these existing routes, future congestion levels are likely to exceed this projection.

These same WisDOT long-range plans demonstrate the need for significant improvements to other modes of

transportation in order to enhance mobility and provide an alternative to auto and truck travel. However, the agency's analysis shows that even with this increased investment, the projected diversion of truck and auto traffic to other modes is not sufficient to eliminate the need for capacity expansions on the state's busiest highways. Even when taking into account full implementation of recommended improvements to non-highway modes (as incorporated in Translinks 21 – high speed rail, conventional rail passenger service, feeder and intercity bus service) WisDOT estimates that only

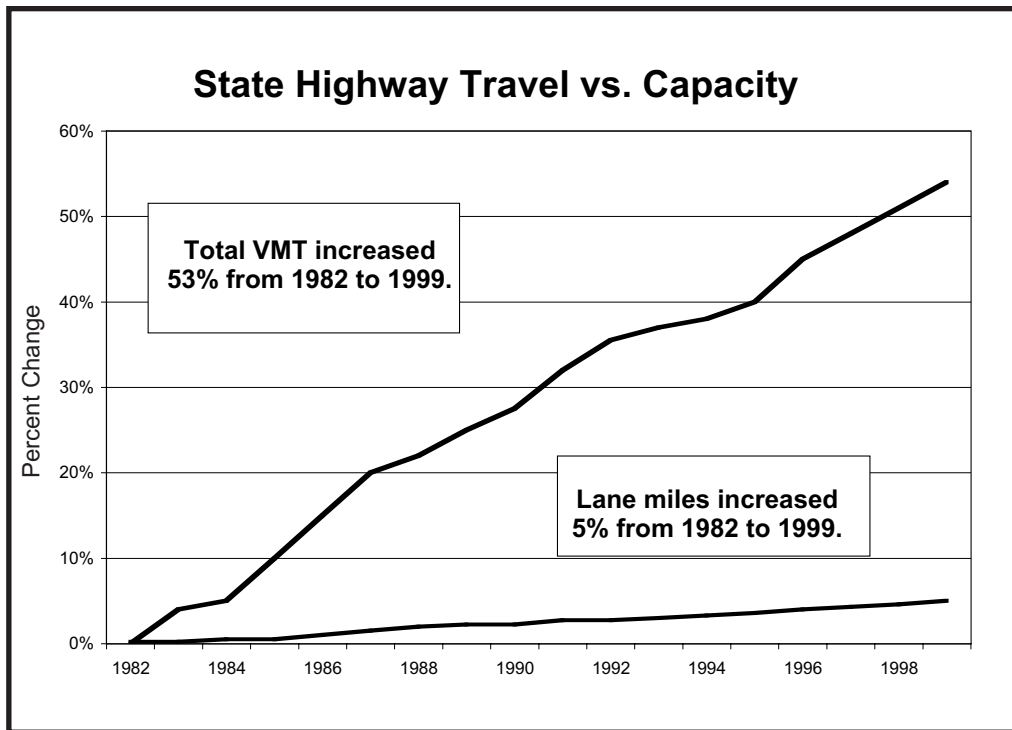
seven-tenths of one percent of intercity passenger trips would be diverted from the state highway system to other modes.

Just as failing to properly maintain pavements and bridges ends up costing the state more in the long run, ignoring emerging congestion also carries a hefty price tag. In 2000, congestion in the

Milwaukee area alone cost an estimated \$390 million in terms of lost time and wasted fuel, according to a report by the Texas Transportation Institute. This amounts to \$620 per rush-hour traveler. The economic benefits of reducing congestion has prompted a vast majority of elected officials in the region to endorse a plan for increasing capacity on the freeway system when it is reconstructed over the next 25 years.

Easing traffic flow also increases safety on Wisconsin's highways. In 2002, 805 people died in Wisconsin traffic crashes – the highest number in 13 years – and this year is already ahead of that pace. The 71 fatalities in April were the worst in 22 years. While much attention has focused on driver-related factors (seatbelts, speeding, inattentive or impaired driving), the General Accounting Office reported recently that roadway conditions are a factor in about one-third of all crashes nationwide.

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\$50 million to \$100 million. Governor Doyle has proposed using additional federal funds to partially restore Major Highway Program reductions from this year's level that were included in his initial 2003-2005 budget. The Legislature passed a transportation budget, which restores Major Highway Program funding to this year's level, enumerates the four critical state highway capacity projects not enumerated by the TPC in December 2002, and requires a \$50 million funding increase in the program starting in FY 2006.

Highway congestion a growing concern

Wisconsin's state highways are more crowded these days. Traffic has grown more than 50% over the last two decades while the size of the system has increased only 5%. By 2020, overall travel is projected to further increase by one-third and truck traffic will nearly double. The highway system's ability to handle these increased demands without gridlock depends on the decisions elected state officials make today.

State highway expansion is addressed through WisDOT's Major Highway Program, which largely expands existing roadways based on safety, congestion and economic development needs. This year's funding level is \$241 million, or 10% of the state's annual transportation spending.

Candidate projects must meet certain cost and lane criteria and can only be approved ("enumerated") by the Legislature typically after being recommended by the Transportation Projects Commission (TPC). The TPC is a 15-member panel of legislators and citizens that evaluates potential projects and recommends an annual level of investment. In December 2002, the TPC failed to recommend the four top-ranked projects because it was uncertain whether construction could begin within six years (required by state statute) given the Major Highway Program annual funding shortfall of

Wisconsin's transportation system can be an asset or a liability

In the past, Wisconsin's transportation system has allowed businesses to become more efficient by cutting inventories and relying on the system as a "rolling warehouse" to accommodate production schedules. This reliability and flexibility attracted new business and allowed existing firms to expand, with 90% of the job growth during the 1990s occurring within five miles of a four-lane state highway.

For Wisconsin residents, work trips represent less than 15% of all household trips. Now, many more of the everyday trips are focused on picking up kids, shopping, traveling to appointments, and social and recreational activities. Increasingly, they are turning to the convenience of personal vehicles to balance these demands.

The state will need to make some strategic decisions on how to mitigate traffic and delay by utilizing alternate modes of transportation and mobility options. Investments in expanded transit service, commuter rail, aviation and others will need to be considered in conjunction with needed highway improvements in order to relieve congestion and provide a balanced transportation system for Wisconsin.



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Issue Papers in this series include:

- #1 Transportation a Key Business Asset in a Changing Economy
- #2 The Cost of Transportation Fund Bonding: Cash or Charge?
- #3 Transportation Funding: How Does Wisconsin Compare?
- #4 Public Transit Critical to Balanced Transportation

The Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin is a statewide, nonprofit organization working for an efficient transportation system for Wisconsin that addresses safe mobility and economic growth. To receive a copy of previous issue papers or for further information please contact the TDA office:

(608) 256-7044 or general@tdawisconsin.org

or visit us on the web:

www.tdawisconsin.org

Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin
131 West Wilson Street, Suite #302
Madison, WI 53703