

Transportation Development Association



Issue Paper #7

Local Roads: Wisconsin's Everyday Connection

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

Local roads and streets are a vital component of the state's transportation system for a number of reasons. This 100,000 mile statewide network ensures that employees get to work on time, students get to school safely, and businesses get products to market. For most business and personal vehicle travel, the local road system represents the first and last leg of the trip. Because many of us take this portion of the system and its reliability for granted, it is important to keep in perspective how the local system is maintained and the level of service it provides.

Growth in vehicle miles traveled and the number of growing communities across the state reflect the additional demand being placed on our local road network. A growing service economy and increased suburb-to-suburb commuting for work, school and appointments further the reliance on local road travel. This demand on the local system manifests itself in two ways – congestion and accelerated deterioration. Congestion has serious safety implications as people take chances to find short cuts around delays, as well as financial ramifications from time spent in gridlock. A perfect example of this trend is highlighted in a recent needs assessment conducted for Stoughton Road/USH 51 in Dane County, which is the main north-south corridor for travel on Madison's east side. The project summary, conducted by WisDOT and an engineering firm, notes significant backups during rush hour, complaints from residents regard-

ing the amount of traffic diverted through their neighborhoods, and a growing number of crashes in the corridor. The document also points out that these factors are attributable to increased traffic volumes, which have doubled over the last twenty years.

Safety a Growing – but Correctable – Concern

Because the local road system now handles a larger amount of traffic than it was designed for in many areas and is typically composed of rural,

two lane roads, motorist safety continues to be a primary concern. A major percentage of traffic accidents and fatalities occur on this portion of the system, and targeted investment would go a long way toward reducing the number of vehicle crashes in the state each year, thus providing a significant benefit in relation to the required investment. In 2002 there were 78,854 crashes on the local road system, or 64 percent of all the

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Targeted, cost effective improvements such as better pavement markings and signage, improved sightlines and wider shoulders would help make our two lane roads safer and reduce the personal and financial loss associated with these accidents.

Maintaining System is Costly

Because our state has such an extensive local

road network – which supports our manufacturing, agricultural and tourism economies – the state and local governments must commit a large amount of resources to maintain and improve that network. In fact, local road improvement and maintenance is one of the largest components of city and town budgets. Without that support, many communities would not be able to provide the level of service that residents and businesses have come to expect and rely upon. According to Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) data, local units of government in Wisconsin spend \$254 per capita on their local road systems, second only to Minnesota.



The national average is \$123. What is not included in the FHWA data is the number of factors that lead to higher costs here. Wisconsin is among the top three states in the country in terms of total miles of paved roads, and the top five for total local road miles. The sheer size of the system means significant resources are required to preserve it. In addition, states in the northern portion of the country have additional demands placed on their road systems due to seasonal changes. These factors combined with the extensive demand placed on the local system by increased traffic and commerce, result in local road investments being a critical aspect of the Wisconsin economy.

Funding Pressures Abound

Like many state programs, transportation resources are under tremendous pressure.

Funding levels for state shared revenues to local governments were reduced despite an infusion of transportation fund revenues in the 2003-2005 budget. General Transportation Aid funding – the largest WisDOT program related to local road funding, which reimburses local governments for activities like road construction, patching, and plowing – has been frozen at 2003 levels for the next two years due to budget woes.

And, the Local Road Improvement Program, which is already under funded at \$47 million annually, is incapable of meeting existing needs. Another revenue source for local transportation projects, the property tax, has reached its peak and is a source of constant political debate. While state transportation budgets remain flat, cost increases for materials, labor, and inflation erode program purchasing power.

Despite these pressures, additional resources are going to be needed in order to preserve and improve this key segment of our transportation system. Implementation of a local option tax is one method which could be targeted to transportation improvements on a local or regional level, and could ease property tax pressures in the process. Another alternative is to increase the amount of state capital funding for transportation. This additional investment could be targeted to improve the local road network, thus providing an immediate return on the investment and a significant impact on the growing crash rate in Wisconsin.



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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:

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