

The Janesville Gazette

State explores transportation needs

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Transportation and the infrastructure that supports it are essential to Wisconsin's economic well-being.

So, too, is the funding that supports that infrastructure, said just about every speaker Monday at one of the five public hearings that a state committee is holding on the "Road to the Future."

But at some point, the rubber will meet the road as a strapped state budget tries to merge with transportation needs entering from all corners of Wisconsin.

The state's Joint Legislative Committee on Transportation Needs and Financing brought its road show to Janesville on Monday. It took 2½ hours of testimony on transportation needs from those representing communities from Beloit to Superior and Platteville to points northeast.

"There was not a lot that was unique, not a lot of information that was surprising to us," Dan Kapanke, a state senator from La Crosse who co-chairs the committee, said after the meeting.

Kapanke and his colleagues have been hearing testimonials to projects past, present and future since the committee formed earlier this year. Ultimately, he said, the committee will advise the Legislature as the state plots a transportation plan that tries to balance declining revenues with needs for an infrastructure that most everyone agrees will keep Wisconsin's economy humming with a blend of vehicle, rail, water, air and pipeline traffic.

That was the case Monday in Janesville.

Janesville City Manager Steve Sheiffer spoke of the increasing volumes on Interstate 90/39, on which truck traffic is expected to double between 1998 and 2020. A growing retail, manufacturing and housing market in Janesville will be fueled by more traffic on neighboring Interstates and highways 14, 26 and 11, he said, adding that Janesville is a

key connection in a transportation infrastructure that reaches for hundreds of miles.

Sheiffer believes the General Motors assembly plant in Janesville is still open because of recent improvements that include a new road to the plant, airport runway extensions and a Highway 11 bypass.

Bill Kennedy, president of the road-building Rock Road Cos. in Janesville, echoed those sentiments.

"The challenges remain for GM, but hopefully, local infrastructure is not one of them," Kennedy said.

John Beckord, president of Forward Janesville, said maintaining transportation funding without transferring funds to the state's general fund is critical to Rock County, which he said is poised to double its gross community product in the next 20 years.

The Janesville area, he said, is positioned to continue its growth in the wholesale trade, logistics and distribution industries.

"There is a lot of interest in those kinds of things," Beckord said, adding that other Janesville companies such as LeMans Corp., Lab Safety Supply and Chambers and Owens don't make anything, but "you can't outsource distribution."

Others spoke on the importance of rail and shipping traffic.

Dave Fischer, service team leader at Riverfront Inc. in Janesville, and Dave Mumma, transit director of the Janesville Transit Service, lobbied the committee on the importance of public transit.

Riverfront is a nonprofit organization that serves people with disabilities. It opened in 2003, has quadrupled its service base and has expanded to a new location on Janesville's north side. Fisher said public transportation is vital to Riverfront's clients.