

Toll roads inevitable, says former transportation secretary

By **TOM HELD**

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Toll roads in Wisconsin are unavoidable, given the need for billions of dollars to pay for road and transportation improvements in the state, a former state transportation secretary said Thursday.

Tom Carlsen, who led the Transportation Department under former Gov. Scott McCallum, broached that long-avoided proposal during his introductory remarks to a discussion of transportation in southeastern Wisconsin held at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Similar proposals and predictions on regional transit and gas tax increases were among the items debated.

"Automatic tolling will come some day," and not soon enough, Carlsen said, noting that gas taxes alone won't generate enough money to rebuild the aging freeway system and support the transit needs in the southeast part of the state. Improvements in fuel efficiency and the increasing use of alternative fuels will decrease the money generated through the motor fuels tax, which provides nearly 60% of the Department of Transportation's annual spending.

Carlsen also said the state needed to raise the gas tax to provide more money for building and maintaining highways, including the outdated Zoo Interchange.

Craig Thompson, the executive director of the Wisconsin Transportation Development Association, also endorsed an increase in the fuels tax as a way to pay for all of the road and transit projects needed to reduce congestion and support businesses.

One panelist, Gretchen Schuldt, offered an alternative to the drive to generate more transportation money: Don't do it all. Schuldt, co-chair of the Citizens Allied for Sane Highways, said policy-makers need to decide between better schools or bigger roads because the taxpayers simply can't afford everything on the wish list. She also tossed a jab at the hosts, suggesting the Medical College charge its employees a congestion fee for taking to the freeway at rush hour.

The group generally favored creating a regional transit authority and sales tax to pay for public bus and rail systems. That would take part of that burden from the property tax.

The discussion was sponsored by WisPolitics.com, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.