

The Journal Times

Transportation group head: Back budget idea or find another

By the Editors

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RACINE COUNTY — Racine native Craig Thompson has joined the Transportation Development Association just in time to witness an interesting political battle.

Thompson, a 1987 St. Catherine's High School graduate, took the helm of the nonprofit membership group on April 30. The TDA has more than 400 members including local governments, county highway shops, businesses, roadwork firms, consulting engineers and labor groups.

At the moment, the TDA and every one of those members is watching and wondering what final shape the state transportation budget will take.

Gov. Jim Doyle's budget includes about \$460 million ostensibly for transportation purposes: an estimated \$300 million from his proposed 2.5 percent tax on oil companies' gross receipts; and \$160 million from raising vehicle registration fees by \$20.

Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce has been ripping the proposed oil company tax. Doyle maintains the state can prevent oil companies from passing the tax on to fuel buyers.

But Thompson, who last spent almost 16 years as the Wisconsin Counties Association's legislative director, said the TDA is more concerned about adequately funding transportation than how it is funded.

"We support revenue that we believe is absolutely necessary," he said.

"If people don't like that mechanism, we believe they should come up with another one."

Less than what's needed

Doyle's budget "would get us in the right direction," Thompson said, although he said the amount is less than what's really needed. Currently the state is \$700 million short of the annual spending needed to reach the goals of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's 2020 plan, and that gap will begin to widen every year.

Ending the automatic indexing of the gasoline tax last year will only exacerbate the problem unless legislators act to meet the needs.

“If the economy is going to grow, you need an efficient transportation network,” Thompson said. He cited a study that says every dollar spent on transportation returns \$3 in economic value.

TDA isn’t totally focused on roads, he said. “Generally, we’re trying to advocate for a balanced transportation system.”

For example, Thompson said the TDA would like to see the proposed Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee commuter rail line built. “We believe there’s tremendous potential there to help the region” by increasing property values, tap into the jobs that businesses need, create retail development and so on.

Doyle’s budget did not include authorization of a car rental fee increase, as approved by the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Transit Authority. That body needs state authorization in order to raise the auto rental fee to \$15, a level calculated to pay both capital and operating costs of KRM.

Diverting money

Although TDA supports Doyle’s transportation revenue ideas, Thompson noted that some of that money would be diverted to areas not normally funded from the transportation budget, such as school busing.

Three hugely expensive and consecutive transportation projects in Southeastern Wisconsin threaten to devour most of the state’s transportation spending, Thompson said: the Marquette interchange; Interstate 94; and then the Milwaukee County Zoo interchange.

The money hasn’t even been raised yet, he noted, adding, “Southeastern Wisconsin would suck it up even if the money was raised.” That situation neglects the rest of the state’s needs such as rebuilding bridges.

One way or another, this state must not let its transportation network fall apart; it will cost so much more to catch up later, Thompson said.

“In this global economy, you can’t fall far behind. Once you lost those businesses, you can’t get them back.”