

Say No to Toll Roads in Milwaukee
By Glenn Grothman

On Tuesday, May 22, a conference on transportation funding was held in Milwaukee. According to newspaper reports virtually every speaker mentioned the possibility of adding tolls to the Milwaukee transportation system. The panelists apparently felt the state had two problems – funding the renovation of the Milwaukee freeway system and more funding for mass transit (buses). As frequently happens when diverse groups of people who all want to spend more money get together, they all agree they have to raise taxes. Tolls on the Milwaukee freeway system are a bad idea – let's look why.

Wisconsin's roads are funded by a combination of federal, state, and local dollars. The bulk of the state's share is paid for by the gas tax and vehicle registration fees. Wisconsin's gas tax at thirty-two cents per gallon is the second highest in the country. The vehicle registration fee was just increased from \$45 to \$55 but is still lower than most states. All of the money goes to Madison and then is distributed to different highway projects around the state (highway aids are also given to local governments). Obviously, some parts of the state need additional work at different times. In the past ten years a new four-lane Highway 29 was built between Green Bay and Eau Claire. Prior to that, a seldom-used four-lane Highway 53 was built between Eau Claire and Superior (if you don't think Wisconsin has built unnecessary roads – or at least built a Cadillac when a Chevy will do – then drive Highway 53 sometime. Four lanes and not another car in sight. The daily traffic count on the four-lane highway in Washburn County is 6,700. By comparison, on the two lanes of Highway 60 between Jackson and Slinger it is 14,600). When these expensive projects were built no one suggested tolls for the people of northern Wisconsin. It was just understood that sometimes the gas tax revenues from all over the state go to a project in need. Now that we do have to redo the Milwaukee freeway system and perhaps add an additional lane in the busy areas, some people from Milwaukee, apparently including the head of the Milwaukee Chamber of Commerce, as well as road builder financing organizations, are suggesting people in southeastern Wisconsin pay a toll as well as the second highest gas tax in the country.

The second concern is the cost of setting up a new collection mechanism. Illinois has suggested getting rid of their current tollbooths because of the cost of maintaining them as well as the people needed to man them. An alternative would be some sort of speed pass for car pool lanes, but these have proven unpopular in other areas.

Another problem with this approach is that proponents are talking about a coalition with people who want to spend more on buses. Recently bus ridership has dropped while the state increased funding. Many Milwaukee buses run relatively empty. This is because the state and federal government pay for over half the Milwaukee bus system resulting in unnecessary routes. The riders themselves pay for only 33% of the system. You pay for all of the costs of your own car, including gas and insurance. Of course another solution would be to stop spending money on roads like Highway 53.

Transportation Secretary Busalacchi has vowed to fight this silly proposal. We do not need people from Washington County paying an additional fifty cents whenever they use Highway 41. All legislators in southeastern Wisconsin should fight this proposal to put a special tax on our roads.

Please let me know what you think on this issue. Contact me here in Madison---please call 1-888-534-0058, or in any of the following ways:

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