

## High Speed Rail is More Stimulus Bait and Switch

The latest sales pitch for high-speed rail reminds me of those raffles where the grand prize is a newly built home.

The winner is thrilled until they realize they can't afford the tax on the winnings and they certainly can't afford the property taxes on a brand new house – let alone future maintenance expenditures. What they thought was a wonderful prize is now filled with costs they can never afford to pay.

Last month, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett and others joined Governor Jim Doyle at the downtown train station as he announced \$810 million for a high-speed rail line between Milwaukee and Madison. When they advocate spending this federal stimulus money they don't, however, talk about all the hidden costs to Wisconsin taxpayers to operate and maintain the line once it's built. Maybe that's because nobody really knows how much it will cost.

One thing is for certain: federal stimulus money for high-speed rail is not free; the federal government is borrowing it from future generations. Accepting this money means obligating Wisconsin taxpayers to spend millions more every year. They say Wisconsin should grab the money before another state gets it and just hope everything will work out. That is just the kind of irresponsible spending that will lead to even bigger state budget deficits and higher taxes down the road.

They tell us that spending \$810 million on high-speed rail will create thousands of new jobs, but according to the federal government's own estimate, the total number of permanent jobs created will be 55. That's more than \$14.5 million per job, not including any hidden costs!

As for hidden costs, no one seems able to provide an accurate estimate of what it will cost to operate and maintain the new rail line and who will pay for it. Projects in other areas have seen original estimates skyrocket once construction begins on new rail lines. For example, California's new, faster system will be about \$65 million per mile.

In addition, study after study shows that rail passenger fares are likely to cover only 20% of the operating costs. That leaves you and me to pick up the other 80% through higher taxes and fees. Now is not the right time to be promoting a major tax or fee increase.

And just how many people will actually ride the new train? Initial estimates predict 338,000 people will ride the train from downtown Milwaukee to the Dane County Airport in Madison each year. That's but a fraction of the state's population. No wonder, with a travel time of one hour and 20 minutes and

ticket prices ranging between \$40-\$66 per round trip; I would save more time and money if I were to drive my 1998 Saturn to Madison. I can get there and back on half a tank of gas without making any stops, and I won't have to pay for parking on the front end or taxi service once I arrive. I think the average person could easily do the math and reach a similar conclusion.

It is important to know where the state will get the money to fully fund high-speed rail when they can't even afford to maintain our current transportation systems.

Over the past few years Governor Doyle and the Legislature have raided \$1.3 billion from the segregated Transportation Fund. That money was supposed to be dedicated to fixing and expanding our existing roads and bridges. Now they can't even keep up with the potholes. Think about how much more stress rail will put on our already scarce transportation dollars. These are dollars that fix the roads and bridges used by the vast majority of Wisconsin residents.

Too many politicians confuse more government spending with economic recovery. Despite Governor Doyle and Mayor Barrett's claims to the contrary, this project is not a silver bullet to create jobs. Committing to more government spending without the revenue to pay for it will only lead to higher taxes and bigger budget deficits. And that will drive jobs away when they are needed most.

Wisconsin deserves a government that looks for ways to do more with less, not one that looks for new ways to tax families and employers when they can least afford it. Ignoring the hidden costs associated with the "award" of federal funds is like winning the raffle for a house but ignoring the true costs of the "prize" – it's just not a stable way to balance the budget.

Now is the time to use our limited financial resources to improve our existing transportation infrastructure so we can promote economic development. We need to use these challenging times as an opportunity to streamline government and reduce the tax burden on working families and employers. Ultimately, this is the strategy that will bring jobs back to our region and our state.