

Let me be perfectly clear: I support the bus system.

Recently, I told the editorial board of this paper that I would like to build an economy where more people have access to jobs that pay enough for these employees to purchase their own vehicle (assuming they want one). Having said that, I know that there will always be a need for a bus system.

### **Long-term Support for Bus System**

This is why I am working so hard to provide a long-term source of support for the bus system. Earlier this year, I began pushing to use the existing sales tax collected on vehicle purchases and apply the growth to mass transit.

If enacted, this plan would provide \$103.5 million by the next state budget cycle. Nearly half of that would be available for the Milwaukee County Transit System.

A new, bi-partisan plan being pushed by Rep. Jeff Stone and Sen. Jeff Pile includes our idea and expands it to vehicle parts – as well as vehicle purchases. This would provide a stable funding source for the bus system.

### **Use of \$91.5 million in Federal Funding**

In addition, I believe that we should use the \$91.5 million to upgrade the bus system.

In contrast, the transit plan being pushed by the Mayor spends \$52.59 million on building a new rail line (that does not include operating costs). It covers a three-mile area in downtown Milwaukee.

The transit-dependent populations in the county are not in the downtown area, but in the central and northwestern portions of Milwaukee. Working men and women who depend on the bus to get to their jobs will not benefit from a downtown system. Senior citizens who need to use the bus to get to and from medical visits or shopping will not benefit from a new rail system.

Furthermore, the rail component will actually hurt our transit-dependent residents by siphoning state funds away from bus-based transit into a system that does little to help people who actually need public transportation. This is why key leaders on the County Board agree with my concerns about the Mayor's plan.

### **Challenges to Bus System**

Finally, there are several reasons for the challenges faced by the transit system:

- Since 2000, the average annual increase in state aid has been less than 1.5% (well below inflation).

- Pension and state mandate costs make it difficult for the county to make up for the lack of state assistance.
- The costs of running the transit system continue to rise. Managers make considerably more than similar positions in county government and employee contracts are much more generous than recent contracts negotiated with county employees.

Last year, I proposed no route cuts and no increase in the fare box (discounts were changed on passes). Changes in routes and ridership started long before I took office and are trends similar to other parts of the county. Still, we need to fix things before they blow up in the future.

### **Solution**

Leadership requires a vision and a practical application of that vision. Adding an additional rail system that serves only a 3-mile radius in downtown Milwaukee, will likely lead to a gas tax increase and competes with the bus system for funding is not the answer.

Finding a stable long-term funding source for the transit system and getting the operators of the system to reduce their costs are the keys to a comprehensive transit strategy for Milwaukee County. Furthermore, using the \$91.5 million to improve and upgrade the existing bus system is the best idea for economic growth in the city, county and region.