

Just last week, I attended the annual meeting of the Historic King Drive Business Improvement District. As I sat through part of the presentation on the benefits of developing in the area, a point worth raising today struck me.

A screen came up with the title “Lloyd St. to Pleasant St. Office and Niche Retail Development.” Under the sub-title of “Development Strengths”, it listed proximity to downtown and Schlitz Park; Access to regional freeway; Historic District and Great neighborhood anchors.

Later, another screen came up listing the development strengths of the “Downtown Connection.” First on the list was proximity to downtown and then came access to regional freeway.

The traffic projections we all have in our packets show that the level of traffic congestion on the freeway system will double by 2020. Even before that time, traffic congestion will continue to be a problem.

While I recognize that the freeway system is an important issue in surrounding counties, my concern here today is specific to Milwaukee County and the impact that future plans for the freeway system will have on jobs in our county. The presentation made at the Historic King Drive Business Improvement District and similar comments made by groups and employers throughout the county show the importance of a working regional freeway system to the economic growth of areas all throughout the county.

More than 50% of the daily traffic on the freeway system in Milwaukee County is made by residents of Milwaukee County. Another 40% of the traffic in Milwaukee County is traffic to and from Milwaukee County businesses and industries. Peak hour freeway traffic on most Milwaukee County freeways is balanced with about 50% of the traffic in each direction.

Voting to allow the Wisconsin Department of Transportation to conduct preliminary engineering on the potential expansion of freeway capacity on just 108 miles of the system and not on 127 miles is equivalent to putting our heads in the sand and ignoring reality. Allowing capacity in surrounding counties while maintaining severe traffic congestion in Milwaukee County will lead to more job creators and more workers opted to leave the area.

It should also be noted that meeting the need for added capacity does not require that graves be moved along the current freeway. This has been showed numerous times throughout the planning process. Frankly, it is insulting that during a time of war, some would opt to mislead the public to think otherwise.

The cost to add capacity on 108 miles is \$5.99 billion while the cost to do 127 miles is \$6.25 billion. The cost to correct the lack of capacity on the freeway system after construction is much higher. Funding for the project will come from the federal government and the state government. The state spends \$1.1 billion per year on highways and the roughly \$200 million per year cost of financing the system can come from that total WITHOUT a tax increase.

With all of this in mind, I move that we pass the resolution offered by myself and seconded by Milwaukee County Supervisor James White. The amendment will change the staff recommended language to insure that the state Department of Transportation reviews capacity needs for 127 miles of the freeway system.

The amendment also notes that the state Department of Transportation should consider the expansion of lanes at two locations in Milwaukee County from the current six lanes up to eight lanes. This action allows the department to conduct preliminary engineering without being prohibited from even considering the need for capacity.

Then, the amendment adds language to the report that asks the state Department of Transportation to “maintain sensitivity to the neighborhoods surrounding the freeway system as part of the design to expand the capacity of the system.” In other words, any plans for the reconstruction of the freeway system are a long ways away from today. We want the department to give careful consideration to the impact of their design, but we don’t believe that they should be prohibited from considering capacity needs along the freeway system within Milwaukee County.

While the future design of freeway reconstruction in southeastern Wisconsin is far from certain, it is clear that the failure to consider capacity needs throughout the system will have a devastating impact on jobs within Milwaukee County.