

The recent editorial “**Transit issues must be resolved**” is correct. I agree.

Last year, we had staff from the county approach city officials about an idea called Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). Our hope was to use a portion of the \$91.5 million in federal funds on improving and upgrading the current bus system through a couple of pilot projects. Initially, we got a good response from the city.

Eventually, however, the plan evolved on the city side into something much bigger and added a rail component. This is where our paths started to diverge.

Downtown Rail System Fails to Meet Transit Needs

The Milwaukee Transit plan being pushed by the Mayor includes \$107.65 million in spending – with \$52.59 million being spent on a new rail line. The plan requires a local match of \$16.15 million.

About half of the spending goes to a new rail system that covers a three-mile area in downtown Milwaukee. Riders on the rail line are likely to be visitors from out-of-town. Additionally, some downtown professionals may use the system.

In contrast, 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 from one part of the county to another 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.

While the Milwaukee Transit plan does include some support for the bus system, the new rail system does not address the needs of people living and working in transit-dependent areas of the county. Even worse, a new rail system would compete with the bus system for the finite amounts of financial support from the state and federal governments for mass transit.

Support and Upgrade Current Bus System

In my State of the County address I called for new support of our bus system. Specifically, I am asking the state to take the growth in the current sales tax on car and truck sales and put it into our bus system. If enacted, this plan would provide \$33.4 million during the 2007/2009 state budget and \$103.5 million during the next state budget cycle. Nearly half of that would be available for the Milwaukee County Transit System.

In addition, I believe that we should use the majority of the \$91.5 million on upgrading the bus system. Improvements would make it easier for the people who currently use the system to get to and from work, school or shopping.

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.