

August 1, 2008

Name
Address
City, WI Zip Code

Dear Name:

Transportation is an important issue in this county, region and state. I am an advocate for a strong transportation system because it helps fuel a strong economy.

Part of my vision for transportation includes an effective expressway system. To that end, we worked with the state Department of Transportation on the Marquette Interchange. They deserve great praise for an excellent job. Now, it is time to prepare for work on building the capacity needed on the remainder of the expressway system.

A good system also includes a great airport. We have that in General Mitchell International Airport. The number of passengers is up XX% from this time last year. We finished the remodeling of all three concourses, the center mall area and other parts of the airport. Soon, we will redo the baggage claim. Plus, we have long-term plans for two new concourses and a third major runway.

The airport is a regional asset and its success can help another regional transportation need: mass transit. Currently, I am working with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on a plan to bid out operations of the airport. The City of Chicago already received \$1.85 billion for the Skyway Toll Bridge and they are about to do \$3 billion deal for Midway Airport.

Estimates suggest that a long-term lease could generate \$20-25 million annually in Milwaukee. In turn, these funds could be used to provide a stable funding source for the Milwaukee County Transit System and to aid in the evolution of a metropolitan transit system (combining ours with Racine, Kenosha and Waukesha).

Alternatively, to address funding for the system, the County Board passed a referendum question on a 1% tax increase for transit and other services. At a time when fuel and food prices are so high, enacting a \$130 million tax increase does not seem to be much of a stimulus to the local economy. In addition, the tax would put the county a full 1.5% higher than Racine and Waukesha counties – creating a tax island as well as pushing more people to Internet sales.

Plus, the promise of property tax relief from the \$130 million tax increase is hollow. In 1991, the County Board passed a .5% sales tax increase with the promise of “property tax relief.” From 1992 to 2002, the tax levy went up 55%. Limiting spending and pushing innovations provide tax relief – not more taxes.

In addition, I want to improve and upgrade the current bus system. Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is the wave of the future. A report by the federal government concludes “think rail, use buses” and BRT fits the bill.

Our BRT system would start with two pilot lines – one running from the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center down Wisconsin Avenue and up to the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee; the other would run from Bayshore Mall over to 27th Street down to the end of the county by the Northwestern Mutual campus and the new Wheaton Franciscan Hospital in Franklin. Each line would use new, state-of-the-art, hybrid buses on bus-only lanes with technology to and drive down travel times. Other cities have seen 30% or more passenger growth, as travel is more appealing to the non-traditional rider.

To build this system (and eventually expand to eight lines in the county and several that go beyond the county line), I would use all of the \$91.5 million remaining from the federal transit funds first approved in 1991. The opinion of the County Board is also to spend these funds on improving the bus transit system.

The Mayor of Milwaukee also has a plan to spend part of these funds on a similar BRT system. Unfortunately the other part would be spent on a streetcar line that would only cover a 3-mile radius in downtown Milwaukee.

For those who suggest I split the money with the Mayor, there is a larger cost to the transit system. Putting in place the Mayor’s plan would cost the bus system up to \$3 million per year. This is because the new system would rely on the same sources of state funding that cover the current bus system. Some nine routes would be cut and five others would be adjusted if the system lost \$3 million.

Instead, the region should move forward with an exciting BRT plan. Earlier this year, the leader of One KC made a presentation to a meeting of the Milwaukee 7. It was very impressive to see what Kansas City is doing in their region. We did some research and found that the region does not have a rail system but is starting up a BRT system.

In June, I met with officials at the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) about our BRT ideas. They pointed to Kansas City and the recent application for federal aid through the Very Small Starts program. We are working with FTA to get quick approval of \$50 million to move forward with BRT here (regardless of the terms of the \$91.5 million).

We do have a vision for a strong transportation system in this region. Great roads and expressways, growing airports and a stable and improved transit system are all part of our plan to build that system into the future.

Sincerely,

Scott Walker
Milwaukee County Executive