

THE WHEELER REPORT
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Friday, September 12, 2008

RTA STUDY COMMITTEE'S OTT WANTS PROPOSAL 'BUILDING FROM GROUND UP'

The Assembly co-chair of a Legislative Council study committee on regional transit authorities wants the panel to "avoid local politics" as it develops a state-wide plan for creating, operating and funding RTAs. The committee meets at 10 a.m., Wednesday (Sept. 17), in Room 412-E, State Capitol.

Rep. Al Ott says next Wednesday's meeting is another of the "educational" sessions of the panel. Rod Clark, director of the Dept of Transportation's Bureau of Transit, Local Roads, Railroads and Harbors is scheduled to provide an overview of the state's regional transportation systems. Also on Wednesday's agenda is Paul Larrouse, director of the [National Transit Institute](#) at Rutgers University. The Institute was established under the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act to develop, promote and deliver training and education programs for the public transit industry.

The committee is directed to "review and provide recommendations on how to create a statutory framework enabling counties, cities, villages and towns to create regional transportation authorities to promote regional cooperation on transportation. Included in the committee directive is funding; method of creation; membership on RTAs; types of transportation services an RTA could provide; and, the scope and limits of RTA authority.

Ott says the committee is "going a little faster than I thought, but the goal is to keep it on track and not get off on local politics, even though that's next to impossible." Although the panel is currently in what Ott calls the "education portion" of its study, "It's not like we're starting from zero." "This study is not to work with all local politics, but is to create an umbrella, state public policy that can empower and facilitate regional transportation," Ott says of the panel's directive.

For the most part, the Senate co-chair of the panel, Sen. Judy Robson, agrees. "My thoughts are similar," she says. "While Madison and KRM are forging ahead, we need to build a template that will allow them to go down the track." She notes her own hometown is "looking at extending the Metra, which ends in Harvard, IL, and bring it to Beloit."

Ott's Assembly district includes significant rural areas, which he points out "have (transportation) needs as well" He also notes the Appleton transit system serves 13 different municipalities and could need "options" if its population goes over 200,000 in the next census and faces the possibility of losing federal funding for transportation programs. "If Appleton wants to offload to a region as a whole, it needs more funding and will have to reorganize to get federal money," says Ott, who adds, "Hopefully, we will have state legislation authorizing that."

Robson also praises the membership of the committee as "astonishing in their credentials." Further, she adds, "We need to build a template for other communities, but also put a spotlight on the value and need for putting rail into Wisconsin. We've been very slow in putting regional transportation in the forefront of transportation needs. We've always focused on interstates and bridges. Now we are going to make a template flexible enough so all communities can fit under it. We've got to think regional transportation rather than focusing on roads and bridges. The demand is there. People are walking to mass transit and voting with their feet."

After Wednesday's session, Ott expects to have some ideas ready for drafting and discussion at later sessions. He expects "to lean heavily" on a draft RTA proposal on which he worked during the legislative session and which was introduced late in the session as a bill by Rep. Robin Vos of Racine as [AB-939](#).

He calls his proposal "consistent" with what he wants the committee to do. "I tried to build from the ground up. I was not trying to save KRM (Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee) or Madison proposals," he says. "The goal (of new legislation) would be that those things could come about in a local transit entity from what we create. I don't want

to specifically legislate local needs. I want an overall, over-arching state policy that would work anywhere in Wisconsin if local units wanted to come together.”

Funding, Ott says, will be a major portion of any proposal and the “sales tax will be a big part of what we are talking about.” He says he will pursue a “pretty rigorous process to get the sales tax approved” which would include discussions on referendums. “Some think they don’t want it (a referendum),” Ott says. “But, nowadays, you could not get it (sales tax revenues) without creating a referendum process.” Still, he adds, he expects the committee to look at other ways cities have funded RTAs, but “the sales tax as a significant source of funds is going to be a primary issue.”

Robson agrees funding “is going to be the key.” She also suggests RTAs could be given taxing authority, which “may very well be the sales tax.” But, she adds, that’s “something that will be discussed down the pike.” Robson also suggests the state’s transportation budget could be a “source of some revenue as well.”

Two other key Legislative Council study committees are scheduled to meet next Tuesday. They are:

- Special Committee on High-Risk Juvenile Offenders, 10 am, 411-S.
- Special Committee on Domestic Biofuels, 10 am, 412-E.

RELEASES.

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