

A Constitutional Amendment Will Not Solve Wisconsin's Transportation Problems

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District

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<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/highway-crowded-s5.jpg>



Should money collected in gas tax and motor vehicle registration fees be kept in the Transportation Fund and used only for transportation purposes? Senator Kathleen Vinehout shares her concerns about the proposed constitutional amendment appearing on the Nov. 4th ballot.

EAU CLAIRE - "Tell us about the Transportation Constitutional Amendment," the Eau Claire man asked.

On November 4th people have the opportunity to vote on an amendment to the Wisconsin Constitution. The question, paraphrased, is: should money collected in gas tax and motor vehicle registration fees be kept in the Transportation Fund and used only for transportation purposes?

Proponents argue 'Yes'. Money set aside for roads should be kept in the Transportation Fund. But **nothing in state government is simple**. And even if the amendment passes, problems funding roads are not solved.

People drive less and drive more efficient vehicles. Gas tax and motor vehicle registration funds aren't keeping up with state spending on roads. Increasing debt payments for past spending takes a bigger bite every year.

At the same Eau Claire neighborhood conversation I was asked "**Why are we voting on something that won't solve the problem**?"

Good question!

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Recent history helps explain why the amendment is before voters. Changing the Constitution is a slow process – and for good reason – so this citizen vote has been in the works for some time.

The state budget contains many funds. Two funds are very large pots of money: the Transportation Fund and the General Fund. Money from the General Fund pays for schools, health care, UW, local government, and prisons.

Moving money from Transportation to the General Fund began in earnest in 2003, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB). Governor Doyle faced a Republican-controlled legislature and a structural deficit greater than the one inherited by Governor Walker. Not surprisingly priorities between the Governor and lawmakers differed.

The most dramatic action came when Governor Doyle used veto powers to prevent a deep cut in education by moving road funds to the General Fund. Road builders and many Republicans cried ‘foul’. Thus was the genesis of this November’s vote.

In Governor Walker’s budgets, money moved in the opposite direction – schools and the UW were shorted while General Fund dollars moved to roads.

Both governors borrowed to pay for roads with General Fund money: a cumulative \$1.3 billion over 12 years. This shorts money available for health and schools well into the future. In addition, borrowing increased in the Transportation Fund as spending outpaced revenue. Money paid to debt service will hit nearly 20% of all transportation spending by the 2015-16 budget.

Misinformation about the amendment abounds. For example, in recent legislative forums, listeners heard the Transportation Fund is not keeping up with the cost of roads because money was taken from the fund and never paid back.

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Yes, money was taken from the fund but it was paid back and more.

Opponents of the constitutional amendment argue lawmakers should not be bound by “budgeting in the constitution”. Future legislatures should be free to move money from one fund to another as needs dictate. As a woman said, “What if there’s a huge surplus in the Transportation Fund and disaster strikes Wisconsin? Do we leave dying residents because there is a ‘lockbox’ on road money?”

Others argue the amendment is “political payback” for assistance by the road builders – one of the most powerful lobbying interests.

In 2013 the Transportation Finance and Policy Commission issued a key report on transportation problems - Keep Wisconsin Moving. The new Commission, established in the 2011-13 budget, was entirely composed of political appointees - a majority of Governor Walker’s appointees.

Their report focused mostly on the need for increased spending. Not surprisingly as a majority of commission members had present or past ties to the road building industry. The report paid very little attention to getting more for current road spending. But herein lies part of the answer.

A recent editorial in the Wausau Daily Herald reminds us: One important part of dealing with the state's transportation gap will be to reduce spending on transportation. Maintaining good roads is vital, but taxpayers should be able to expect that every project is conducted efficiently; every proposal is scrutinized to determine if it really needs to be done.

Evaluating the effectiveness of existing spending should be the first step before ordering new spending. **A constitutional amendment is no substitute for careful, deliberative and transparent governing**

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