

Transportation Amendment Was Birthed And Nurtured By Special Interests

Written by Wisconsin Democracy Campaign
Thursday, 30 October 2014 14:49

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The amendment isn't a solution to the transportation fund's cash shortage because it doesn't cut highway spending or raise more cash to pay for projects. The politically distasteful problem of how to close the fund's multi-million dollar deficit is still likely to include tax and fee increases.

MADISON - With few exceptions the news reports and editorials about the proposed constitutional amendment voters are being asked to approve on next Tuesday's ballot don't get into where it came from and why it got there.

The measure is a special interest-backed plan to amend the Wisconsin Constitution to prevent elected officials from being able to use the state transportation fund to pay other bills in the future like they did during the Doyle administration. At first whiff, the proposed amendment seems like a good idea given the growing short- and long-term shortfall the fund faces to pay for the state's wish list of major highway projects.

But the amendment isn't a solution to the transportation fund's cash shortage because it doesn't cut highway spending or raise more cash to pay for projects. The concrete protection the proposed amendment grants the fund isn't afforded other important pots of money used for health care, education, the environment, poverty and other programs. Perhaps more critically, the amendment will tie the hands of public officials from ever using money from the fund for non-transportation purposes under any circumstances, even an economic emergency or widespread public health or safety crisis.

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The proposal is before voters because a group of wealthy special interests contributed nearly one-third — \$5.5 million — of the \$18.3 million large individual and political action committee contributions accepted by the current legislature, which gave it final approval between 2011 and July 2014.

Those interests include manufacturing, business, construction, tourism, agriculture, transportation, natural resources, road builders and a couple of labor unions that represent workers in the industry. They support the proposed amendment because the state transportation fund — fueled by state gas taxes and vehicle registration fees — pays for major highway projects, road maintenance and other transportation costs and services those industries build or use.

That's how the amendment got on the ballot.

Where did it come from? The proposal is a hybrid of a plan developed by the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC, a pro-business organization that connects powerful business interests and big campaign contributors with state legislators around the country to develop model legislation on economic and social issues that elected officials can introduce in their states.

Wisconsin governors have no authority to approve or reject proposed constitutional amendments, which must be approved by two successive legislatures and then by voters in a statewide referendum like the one on the November 4 ballot. But GOP Governor Scott Walker, who supports the amendment and criticized his predecessor for raiding the transportation fund when the state faced a multi-billion dollar deficit, is also a major beneficiary of the amendment's special interest backers. Those interests contributed slightly more than a third — \$15.7 million — of the \$45.1 million in large individual and PAC contributions the governor accepted between 2011 and July 2014.

And whether the amendment passes — as is likely — or not next Tuesday, Walker and the legislature still face the politically distasteful problem of how to close the fund's multi-million dollar deficit and sell a solution to voters that is likely to include tax and fee increases.