

ELECTIONS

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker suggests highways don't need more lanes when they are rebuilt

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Gov. Scott Walker questioned the need Tuesday for expanding highways at a time when the state is contemplating rebuilding roads in the Milwaukee area and around the state.

Without providing details, the GOP governor suggested the state could get by with adding fewer lanes when it rebuilds roads.

"There are some groups out there that want to spend billions and billions and billions of dollars on more, bigger, wider interchanges across the state," Walker said. "I actually think we should be fixing and maintaining our infrastructure. I don't know that we need bigger and better and broader right now when we have a changing transportation system."

Walker made the comments at the Milwaukee County War Memorial Center at an event sponsored by the Rotary Club of Milwaukee and Milwaukee Press Club. He told those at the event he would provide more details on his transportation plan in the coming weeks; he did not take questions from reporters afterward to explain his thoughts.

Craig Thompson, executive director of the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin, said Walker may be right that some highways don't need more lanes when they are rebuilt. But many of them do because of increased traffic, he said.

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Rebuilding the stretch of I-94 between the Zoo and Marquette interchanges without new lanes would create a bottleneck, he said. The same is true of I-39 where it connects with the Beltline in Madison, he said.

But even if fewer lanes are added, the state still wouldn't have enough money to build all the projects that are planned, Thompson said.

"There's just no way we have enough even if you implement something like that," said Thompson, whose group consists of road builders, engineering firms, local governments and others.

The state spends about \$3 billion a year on transportation using a mix of state and federal funds.

Walker took up the issue in response to an attendee's question as he heads into his re-election campaign against state schools Superintendent Tony Evers, a Democrat.

Evers has called for investing more in roads and has said he would consider all options for getting more money for highways, including raising the 32.9-cent-per-gallon gas tax. Evers hasn't said how much of an increase he would be willing to accept — a point Walker emphasized on Tuesday.

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Walker noted drivers are increasingly using hybrid and electric vehicles and questioned whether relying on the gas tax will remain a good way to fund roads in the future. He didn't address other alternatives for funding highways, such as tolls or charging drivers mileage-based fees.

"We can do it without a massive gas tax increase," Walker said of funding roads.

He also raised questions about how much people will drive in the future, saying his two sons in their 20s use ride-hailing services Uber and Lyft more than they drive.

Walker has fought with his fellow Republicans in the Legislature over road funding in recent years, with many Assembly Republicans backing more money for highways and Walker resisting an increase in the gas tax. The dispute caused a three-month budget impasse last year.

Just after that budget fight ended, Walker pulled the plug on plans to rebuild the I-94 stretch between the Zoo and Marquette interchanges. He abandoned the project — after earlier embracing it — just after the federal government warned his administration it would withdraw its authorization for the work unless the state came up with a way to fund it.

Evers spokeswoman Britt Cudaback said Evers would make transportation a top priority and called Walker's latest idea a "last-minute proposal."

"Restricting road expansion in Wisconsin's fastest-growing areas would be an economic disaster and drive massive traffic congestion," she said in a statement.