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Sent: Wednesday, January 14, 2015 11:09 AM

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Subject: GSM-Don't put the brakes on Milwaukee's streetcar project

Opinion

Don't put the brakes on Milwaukee's streetcar project

Rick Wood

South side alderman Bob Donovan (right) has been a vehement critic of Mayor Tom Barrett's streetcar project. Congresswoman Gwen Moore says critics such as Donovan don't understand the benefits of a modern streetcar to the city.

By Gwen Moore

Jan. 14, 2015 10:49 a.m.

Thanks to Mayor Tom Barrett's proposed downtown streetcar project, opportunity is knocking loudly on Milwaukee's door. Unfortunately, there are some who refuse to hear it.

Expanding our city's public transportation options shouldn't be a controversial issue. When it comes to large metropolitan cities such as Milwaukee, public transit is widely recognized as a critical component in driving economic development and spurring economic growth. Streetcar projects, like the one proposed by Barrett, include an array of short- and long-term employment opportunities for Milwaukee residents and have a proven track record in attracting investment and encouraging greater commercial activity.

The advantages of Milwaukee's streetcar project extend far beyond its fiscal benefits. In addition to making our thriving downtown district more accessible, modern streetcars also help address critical environmental concerns such as air pollution and traffic congestion, the necessary evils that stem from a car-based transportation infrastructure. The project's emphasis on bicycle access and sustainability has the unique potential to attract new, younger residents to our downtown district and further improve our community's livability index for generations to come.

Cities such as Portland, Ore., and Seattle have earned national attention with the success of their streetcar programs. In 2008, city officials in Portland credited their streetcar line with attracting \$3.5 billion in investment and the construction of 10,212 housing units within two blocks of the route. Seattle's South Lake Union neighborhood, a region once known for its sparse amenities and ubiquitous vacant lots, has seen billions in private and public dollars invested into the community since the streetcar line became operational. These achievements have prompted a massive resurgence of streetcar projects in major cities across the country.

Of course, not everyone shares Barrett's vision for Milwaukee's future. Despite the success of streetcars in other American cities, there are those in Milwaukee who refuse to entertain the mayor's proposed plan. Citizens for Responsible Government, a Milwaukee-based conservative grass-roots organization, is behind a new push to stop the streetcar project, painting the mayor's proposal as "ill-advised and wasteful." Two Milwaukee aldermen joined CRG's efforts with the formation of a special committee and a citywide petition drive. If they can find 31,000 signatures within 60 days, it will force a binding referendum on the project's funding.

Critics have made some outrageous and erroneous claims about the streetcar plan, going as far as publicly branding the project as "racist" and "immoral." Some have taken a more reasoned approach, contending that public funds would be better suited going to other priorities such as schools and improving our existing bus lines. There is no doubt that education and enhanced mobility are critical to our city's economic and social well-being. As a member of Congress, I have worked tirelessly to address these vital elements of our society. But when it comes to this specific funding, it is important to recognize the flaws in such an argument.

As much as opponents would like these federal funds to be redirected to other modes of public transportation or to our public schools, this just isn't possible. Years ago, the Federal Transit Administration, a federal agency that provides financial and technical assistance to local public transit systems, made it abundantly clear that these funds could be used only for Milwaukee's streetcar project. Any attempt to change the purpose of this money would require additional federal legislation, a prospect that likely would face insurmountable obstacles in our current political climate.

Think of it like this: The federal government gave our city a massive streetcar gift certificate. We can take this money and use it to give our city the tools and resources it needs to prosper and thrive, or we can walk away and leave millions of dollars on the table.

If this scenario sounds familiar, it's probably because we've been here before. Remember when Republican Gov. Scott Walker turned his back on yet another 21st-century transportation system with the rejection of \$810 million in federal stimulus dollars for high-speed rail between Milwaukee and Madison? Or when he turned down federal funding that would have provided lifesaving health care coverage to 120,000 residents living in poverty? That controversial move left Wisconsin's BadgerCare program facing a colossal shortfall, squandered the creation of 11,200 new jobs and cost Wisconsin nearly \$2.6 billion in additional federal spending.

We learned a costly and valuable lesson from Governor Walker's blunders: When opportunity knocks, answer the door. We cannot allow ourselves to make the same mistake with Milwaukee's streetcar project. Let's use this streetcar as a vehicle in our quest to reach Milwaukee's full economic potential.

Gwen Moore, a Democrat from Milwaukee, is a member of Congress representing Wisconsin's 4th district.

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"Be kinder than necessary, for everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle."

By T.H. Thompson and John Watson