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Cities' infrastructure could hit a dead end

New funding sources essential, institute urges

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Posted: April 29, 2008

Milwaukee and 22 other metropolitan areas are "coasting on prosperity" while largely heading for a massive pothole because of a lack of planning and funding for roads, public transportation and other infrastructure, according to an analysis distributed Tuesday.

Repeating recent calls of crisis over the nation's deteriorating highways and bridges, the report from the Washington-based Urban Land Institute pushed for alternative funding sources to fill the shortfall in necessary infrastructure investment.

None of them have gained much traction previously in Wisconsin, particularly toll roads, fees based on vehicle miles traveled and private partnerships in road construction and fee collections.

The report urges naysayers to reconsider opposition to new funding in light of the growing gap between the money available for maintaining and building transportation and the need to upgrade a transportation system and stay economically competitive.

Nationally, the report estimates the shortfall in spending on transportation infrastructure, including rail, at roughly \$170 billion per year. In Wisconsin, the state Legislative Fiscal Bureau has estimated the funding for roads and mass transit falls \$698 million short of what's necessary to build up the transportation system to reach goals set for 2020.

"When you look at how big the funding gap is, and the buying power of the gas tax in future years, all those other options are going to have to be on the table," said Craig Thompson, executive director of Wisconsin Transportation Development Association. "We are way behind where we need to be from a competitive standpoint to compete economically."

Thompson agreed with one other recommendation in the Urban Land Institute analysis: Government bodies shouldn't siphon money generated through transportation user fees to fund other needs. That's a particular point of contention, given proposals by Gov. Jim Doyle to move more dollars from state transportation funds to fill other gaps in the state budget.

Public-private partnerships, similar to those that helped finance work on the Chicago Skyway and Indiana Toll Roads, are the favored option of Dale Anne Reiss, the global director of real estate for Ernst & Young LLP. Reiss participated in the analysis as an adviser.

"If the U.S. fails to embrace this model, it could lead to our economy falling behind more of our global competitors," she said.

Other countries, including China, India and the United Arab Emirates, are in a growth and development stage of road and transportation development, while the U.S. is in a "coasting on prosperity" stage, according to the report.

In addition to a massive public works program, the report recommended better land use planning, more federal coordination and better strategic investing to solve the infrastructure crisis.

Milwaukee was listed in the report as one of the metropolitan areas that is basing its long-range plans on improving transit options.

Journal Sentinel reporter Diana Marrero in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.

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From the April 30, 2008 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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