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Comment on Wisconsin's Connections 2030 Plan Feb. 7, 2009

Wisconsin's Connections 2030 20-year transportation plan has a lot of good ideas and the attractive quality of promoting a multimodal approach to Wisconsin's future transportation scheme. Overall however, it is disappointing because it continues to reflect too much 20th century grey economy thinking rather than 21st century green economy thinking. Top recommendations all involve construction and expansion of highways rather than ways to avoid them (witness the inset in the Introduction). The goal of "safe and efficient movement of people and products throughout the state, enhancing economic productivity and the quality of Wisconsin's communities while minimizing impacts to the natural environment" is a good one. Unfortunately, the plan does not provide guidelines for meeting that goal, recommending instead that our first priority should be "enhancing state trunk highway capacity."

What is needed instead is for a plan that avoids the construction and expansion of highways—bold, sometimes iconoclastic, recommendations that promote hauling freight by rail rather than highway and truck, that promote good home economics that encourage inexpensive travel modes such as walking, bicycling and using public transit. A major objective should be reducing vehicle miles traveled. Transportation policy should be rewarding good Travel Demand Management, pay-as-you-drive auto insurance and market-based parking policies. It should be possible for someone to live in, and travel around, Wisconsin without a car.

The plan suggests (in a chart in the executive summary) that the primary role of mass transit is to provide mobility and transit choice whereas the primary role of road expansion is to foster economic development. That is not true. Rather, primary roles of mass transit include economic development, combating global warming, smart growth, preserving prime agricultural land, public health, social justice, sustainability, enhancing transportation efficiency and maintaining our quality of life. Road expansion is often antithetical to such values, is expensive, and fritters away tax revenue.

As bus advocates who are encouraging the adoption of rapid buses that run on a mixture of arterial roads and separate guideways, we cannot accept the plan's undue emphasis on fixed-guideway transit. Rather, we see the need for different kinds of transit that work together in mutually enhancing ways. The plan needs to better acknowledge seamless transitions from one mode of transit to another. In general, there is too much emphasis on one or another mode as an organizational tool.

The plan gives a good start, but only a start, to the issue of adequate funding. Support for the idea of Regional Transportation Authorities is a step in the right direction, as is the call for a 60% support of Milwaukee and Madison's transit operating expenses by federal and state funds. However, the separation between operating and capital costs is too often an artificial barrier to reasonable budget appraisals although the call for federal operating funds is welcome. Beside the artificial separation of funds that should be modified, another problem is that present funding mechanisms for transit are broken. We need to realistically calculate the relative costs of various transportation modes. That appraisal would often find fixing existing infrastructure and enhancing public transportation more cost-effective than building new lanes, both in terms of providing good, local, long-term jobs, and in terms of our dependence on fossil fuels.

The idea that there needs to be an appraisal points to a possibly serious omission of the plan – the need for research. Good planning is based on good research, but Wisconsin currently does not have an adequately-funded research institute devoted to transportation. Yes, there is research going on but it is not nearly at the level required for good transportation planning.