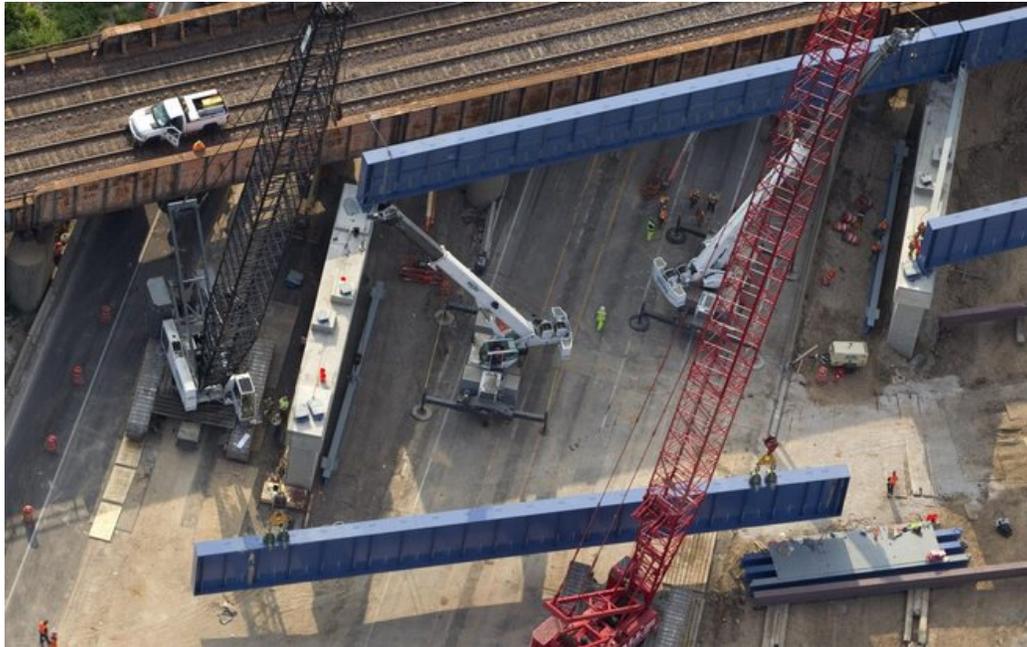


OPINION | ON, WISCONSIN

Wisconsin needs to meet transportation challenge



Construction crews lay steel for a new railroad bridge over I-94 and install storm sewers underneath the interstate as part of the Zoo Interchange reconstruction in Milwaukee County in 2014. Credit: Mark Hoffman

May 29, 2016

Unlike the folks on the Titanic, we've actually been watching this iceberg coming at us for some time now. And the only course corrections we've made have been to steer more directly into its path. No, I'm not talking about the federal debt. I'm talking about the deteriorating transportation infrastructure that is crumbling in every state in the nation, including Wisconsin.

If your eyes glaze over when you see "infrastructure," replace the word with "potholes." Or "disintegrating roadways." Or "collapsing bridges." Or "buses that don't take you where you need to go." You get the idea.

These issues involve your safety, your budget, your ability to get around, as well as the economy and businesses around you.

Last week, I moderated a panel of local officials and business leaders as part of the "[Just Fix It](#)" campaign by the Transportation Development Association, a statewide alliance of 400 transportation stakeholders. The association is holding a series of six meetings around the state — the last one will be in Wausau on Wednesday — to start looking for solutions to the infrastructure iceberg. The members of my panel: Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele; Waukesha County Executive Paul Farrow; Steve Baas of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce; Town of Lisbon Chairman Jeff Osterman; Jim Paetsch a vice president at the Milwaukee 7; and Gerald Peterson, Oak Creek city administrator.

That iceberg has several components: Roads and bridges around the country are deteriorating because many of them are reaching the end of their useful lives. Given other urgent issues and a reluctance to raise taxes, maintenance issues tend to get a low priority from governments. Gas taxes — the traditional way of paying for roads — are no longer viable because a) they're not being increased and b) because more fuel-efficient vehicles use less gas, which is great for drivers but not so great for providing revenue for roads.

A report by [TRIP](#), a national transportation research group, put some numbers behind the issue in Wisconsin: Roadway features such as dangerous curves contribute to about one-third of fatal traffic crashes, which took 2,743 lives in Wisconsin from 2011 to 2015. Poor roads cost Milwaukee drivers on average \$2,060 annually; Madison drivers, \$2,072. Statewide, 42% of major roads are in mediocre to poor condition; in Milwaukee, it's 56%; in Madison, 68%. More than 2,000 (14%) of the state's bridges are in need of repair or modernization. Nearly 1.4 million jobs are tied to transportation-related industries.

While most of the discussion last week was on roads, bus transit systems also are very much a part of the issue (as are trains, airports

and harbors, for that matter). Some notes from our discussion: Transit — including the Milwaukee streetcar and proposed bus rapid transit lines — matters to workers, and can attract millennials and new companies. Some road improvements such as remaking the Zoo Interchange and building the Waukesha bypass are as critical as maintaining streets. People will pony up when they see the need, as they did in the Town of Lisbon by raising bonding limits to pay for roads. Raising registration fees and the gas tax will help but we need to consider other systems based on drivers paying for the roads they use.

There is no single answer. All ideas need to be on the table as we continue this discussion, and TDA deserves credit for starting it.

Baas made an important point that we should all keep in mind as we move forward. Wisconsin can't afford to pit issues of new roads, maintenance and transit against each other. The resultant political infighting will sabotage our ability to meet the challenge.

What is needed, though, is agreement on what the most serious challenges are and what the best mix of transportation systems is — and then finding a sustainable way to pay for those systems. That's the only way to avoid colliding with that iceberg.

Ernst-Ulrich Franzen is the Journal Sentinel's associate editorial page editor. Email: efranzen@jrn.com; Twitter: [@efranzen1](https://twitter.com/efranzen1)

ERNST-ULRICH FRANZEN ARCHIVE

Jun 5, 2016 | How will Wisconsin pay for roads?

May 22, 2016 | Photo ID card easy to get — in some cases

May 8, 2016 | When 30 cents can be real annoying

May 1, 2016 | Method of selecting justices needs to be less political

Apr 24, 2016 | On open government, Wisconsin citizens were the real winners

Apr 20, 2016 | Keep an eye on state Public Records Board

Apr 17, 2016 | Sheriff David A. Clarke Jr. should release immigration records

Apr 10, 2016 | Stay out of the shadows: Disclose names of campaign donors

Apr 3, 2016 | It's simple: your vote matters

Mar 27, 2016 | Today's political insults show a woeful lack of imagination

Mar 20, 2016 | Change coming for Milwaukee County Board

Mar 17, 2016 | Some sunshine from Gov. Scott Walker?

Mar 13, 2016 | Sunshine Week and the state Senate

Mar 6, 2016 | DNR must do better on government transparency

Feb 28, 2016 | Protecting student journalists

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/opinion/wisconsin-needs-to-meet-transportation-challenge-b99733668z1-381170941.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.