

Rep. Sargent: Republican bill second-guesses, restricts local governments

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Madison, Wisconsin — Today the Assembly Committee on Ways and Means held a public hearing on Assembly Bill (AB) 361, a bill restricting local governments raising money for local road and transportation-related projects through vehicle registration fees. AB 361 would not just affect future attempts to impose wheel taxes, but would also apply retroactively to more than twenty-five local governments with existing wheel taxes in place.

“The Legislature has no business second-guessing local governments who are rightfully elected by and answer to voters in their communities,” said State Representative Melissa Sargent (D-Madison), ranking Assembly Democratic member on the Ways and Means Committee. “We should trust local elected officials to make decisions about their community’s needs and priorities.”

AB 361 requires local governments to conduct a referendum upon enacting an ordinance imposing a local vehicle registration fee. Vehicle registration fees, also known as “wheel taxes,” are annual flat fees imposed by municipal or county governing bodies to raise money for local transportation-related purposes like road projects and maintenance. AB 361 would create an additional barrier to the already-limited options local governments have to raise revenue in the face of the State’s failure to adequately fund transportation needs.

“If Republicans hadn’t spent the last seven years slashing and cutting funding to our communities, maybe towns, villages, and cities across Wisconsin wouldn’t have

to basically host bake sales to raise the money to fill their potholes,” said Ways and Means Committee member State Representative Chris Taylor (D-Madison), who also sits on the Joint Finance Committee. “It’s no coincidence that more than twenty of twenty-five existing wheel taxes have been implemented since Governor Walker took office and Republicans assumed control of the Legislature. We need to support local communities rather than hamstringing them, because they are the economic drivers of our state.”

The twenty-five municipalities and counties with existing wheel taxes include communities across the state of Wisconsin such as St. Croix County, City and County of Milwaukee, Lincoln County, City of Sheboygan, Village of Tigerton, Marathon County, City of Gillett, Chippewa County, City of Lodi, and the Town of Arena, among others.

“What’s clear is that this isn’t just an urban issue—this bill would hurt small cities and rural communities across Wisconsin already facing transportation shortfalls,” said State Representative Mark Spreitzer (D-Beloit). “Passing AB 361 would be absolutely crippling for local governments. Two communities in my district that would be affected by this bill get large portions of their funding for transportation projects through vehicle registration fees. Due to lack of action at the state level, these communities are left with no other options.”

AB 361 was introduced by State Representative Michael Schraa (R-Oshkosh) and State Senator Stephen Nass (R-Whitewater) and today’s public hearing was the first step in AB 361 moving through the Legislature. The bill has not yet been scheduled for an executive session.