

Don Vruwink: Shifting gears and moving forward

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As a teenager, I drove the family truck to the fields, dropping off fertilizer and seed, shifting gears more than I needed, but it was fun and it's how I learned to drive. I couldn't wait to get my first car, a Ford Fairlane, and I can't remember the year but it didn't matter.

I can't help but think about the different times that our Millennial Generation is growing up in. As the Legislature develops the state budget, we legislators must keep in mind that Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) are on the forefront of changing transportation trends.

According to a survey by the Wisconsin Public Research Interest Group, students on our 24 college campuses in Wisconsin said they wanted more transportation options beyond the traditional family car ... although 85 percent want the traditional car as well.

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Seventy-five percent of students who were surveyed said it was very or somewhat important to live in a place with transportation options where they did not have to drive.

Fifty-five percent said they would be somewhat more or much more likely to stay in Wisconsin if they could live in a place where trips for work, recreation, and errands did not require a car.

Eighty-five percent said it was very or somewhat important to them to avoid or

reduce costs associated with having a car. (You wonder how much student loan debt is on their minds.)

Sixty-three percent of respondents said it was important to them to be able to use their smart phones, read, work, and engage in social media while traveling.

Millennials see alternative modes of transportation as good for the environment, saves them money on gas, and avoids parking fees and difficulty parking.

A recent report by Forward Analytics raised concern that Wisconsin doesn't have enough young people to take over jobs from Baby Boomers who are set to retire in 10-15 years. Dale Knapp, research director, says we've got to figure out how to turn that around and we have to do it fairly quickly.

We have to make Wisconsin a place where our young people want to stay. It's important to have great schools, a clean environment, an array of transportation options, short commutes and walkable communities.

We need a state budget that helps Wisconsin communities lead the way toward a multimodal future as cities like Eau Claire, La Crosse, and Madison, which have invested in bike trails, walking infrastructure, and transit systems that connect the city. They have successfully attracted young people. Other cities like Middleton are beginning but they need help and the state budget would be a good place to start. We need young people and families in order for Wisconsin to grow its economy.

When I began driving, the roads were not crowded and I could shift as much as I wanted just to play around. But for most teenagers today, that doesn't exist. Without attracting and keeping young people in Wisconsin, our businesses and communities will stagnate. Let's remember in the budget what Millennials are attracted to.

- Vruwink, D-Milton, represents the 43rd Assembly District.