

Tommy G. Thompson: Wisconsin must undertake transportation reform

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We've done it before...and we can do it again

Earlier this spring, the Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership held a transportation conference that brought together academics and policy leaders from across the state to discuss the transportation problems and possibilities facing state lawmakers.

We met at the Harley-Davidson Museum in Milwaukee. But the noise inside did not come from those wonderful bikes I love so much. No, inside the museum, some of the state's best and brightest sifted through academic studies, historical data, public opinion surveys, and the current proposed state budget. What we found was commonsensical and enlightening.

Everyone knows roads and bridges are important to Wisconsin's economy. Manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism drive our economy—and these industries require a strong transportation system.

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Let's face it: Our roads and bridges have gotten worse over the past several years.

Studies and common sense point to the need for a reinvestment in our state's infrastructure. Policymakers have studied the issue of transportation funding to death over recent years. The data clearly support a long-term funding need. We need leadership to get the job done.

Even in today's fractured, hyper-partisan world, there is hope that Democrats and Republicans can come together to pass a common-sense plan to build and maintain a robust, but affordable transportation infrastructure.

I believe there's a way to bridge our differences on our needed transportation investment, because we've done it before.

When I became Governor, Wisconsin's economy was in rough shape, so I made economic development my highest priority. I knew we had to do everything possible to make Wisconsin a more attractive place to start, grow, or relocate a business. The *"Corridors 2020"* plan was a critical piece of our overall economic development strategy. Honestly, I didn't need national data to tell me that good roads and bridges were critical to a strong Wisconsin economy. So, I sent my Secretaries of Development and Transportation across the state to educate the public about the need for good infrastructure.

At the start of that campaign I couldn't get the Democrat controlled legislature to agree with all of the plan initially, so I used my partial veto to create four-lane highways, such as Hwy 151 from Fond du Lac to Dubuque. But as time went on, strong bipartisan support grew for infrastructure investment. The bottom line is *"Corridors 2020"* was a crucial piece of the economic recovery Wisconsin experienced while I was Governor.

We led from the East Wing; we engaged the public; and we earned bipartisan support. The people wanted us to roll up our sleeves and fix problems, and that's just what we did. That same opportunity exists today if the governor and lawmakers are willing to embrace it.

On any challenging issue, progress begins when you listen to people. Then it's time to figure out a strategy and lead—bring lawmakers together and make your case so compelling even members of the “opposition” party want to share in your success. When you listen, tackle challenges together, and share in the success, anything is possible.

Voters are willing to pay more if the money is used to improve local roads, bridges, state highways, and improve pavement quality statewide. Increased registration fees, targeted taxes, or other road-usage models are all options that should be on the table. Lawmakers must have an open and honest discussion regarding Wisconsin's transportation needs.

The time has come for progress. It will take strong leadership from both Republicans and Democrats.

There aren't Democrat roads or Republican highways. The roads and bridges of Wisconsin are ours, an essential investment for the ongoing prosperity and continued safety of our state.

Politicians on both sides have ignored the warnings and kicked the can down the road. The people of Wisconsin are thirsty for leadership on this issue. They know our roads and bridges are in rough shape. And they want our governor and lawmakers to come together and fix it.

We won't fix all our transportation needs overnight, but we need to get started before the problem gets worse.

— Tommy G. Thompson was Governor of Wisconsin from 1987-2001 and won a record four gubernatorial elections. His approach to public leadership and the value it brought to citizens of the state grew throughout his tenure.