

Wisconsin Town's Association: Maclver's many transportation myths

Posted on Thursday, May 2, 2019

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The WTA is a blue collar organization. Our magazine is on newsprint, like town government we have limited resources, and we don't write many press releases. But, when salt of the earth town officials who are courageous enough to serve are called dishonest, we are compelled to reply. When town officials are accused of lying, the same officials who are so dedicated that they jump on a back hoe to replace a culvert in the middle of the night in a torrent of water or use a chainsaw to remove trees from the road during a thunderstorm, we are forced to defend them. Last week the Maclver Institute issued a press release and stated: "That means local officials are either failing to prioritize critical local, transportation projects when the time comes to set their own budgets, or they are being dishonest about the needs that exist."

In our experience, town officials are the most honest, dedicated people on the planet. What is either dishonest or born out of complete ignorance of how transportation funding works, is Maclver's press release. Let's look at only a few of the many myths and twisted half-truths. Maclver begins by stating "...local governments are generally responsible for their own local road repair needs..."

Unfortunately, they ignore the purpose and practice of General Transportation Aids. It is the primary town program, and as noted in the DOT guide, GTA is indeed for road repair: "...local governments with a partial reimbursement of funds to offset the cost of county and municipal road construction, maintenance, traffic, and police costs".

Maclver unsuccessfully attempts to create the false foundation that highway aids are primarily for construction – not maintenance – to ridicule towns by stating that in 2017, “...480 out of 1252 towns actually spent less on road work than they took in in state aid – which means zero local investment in roads”. They use a DOR report to compare highway aids (\$154.4 million) to town spending only on road construction (\$110.4 million). However, they fail to include town road maintenance and administration (\$283.9 million); town road related facilities (\$5.7 million); and, other transportation (\$3.3 million). They conveniently left out almost \$300 million in town investment.

Maclver goes on to state that “...many local governments spent only state money on local transportation projects and no local money at all...” This statement ignores the local contribution required to receive GTA, LRIP, and bridge aids. Simply, due to the cost share formulas of these programs, it’s not possible to have towns getting state aid and spending zero on roads as they falsely purport.

In their attempt to ridicule towns by comparing state highways aids to only a small portion of town spending, they go to the length of shockingly and artificially inflating highway aids by including state and FEMA disaster funding. Does anyone recall the recent flooding? By including flood aids in their rationale to call town officials dishonest, are they really arguing that the local citizens should have to fend for themselves to replace blown out culverts so that the ambulance or fire truck can get to their home?

Take for example the Town of Summit. In 2017, they received almost \$89,000 of disaster aids, or 31.6% of their total state highway aids. Or, take the Town of Lincoln, which received \$177,629 (65.3% of aids) to replace washed out roads, culverts, and bridge footings. Or, finally what about the Town of Jackson that needed \$153,680 (46.1% of aids) to replace gravel, blacktop, and remove downed trees? Yes, these are high and anomalous percentages, but have we seriously reached a point in the transportation debate where disaster aids are being used as a weapon in attempt to fault towns for enduring natural disasters?

Why do towns invest so much in the maintenance that Maclver forgets? Because focusing on preservation of current infrastructure to maximize its lifespan is fiscally sound. We’re confused why Maclver would neglect to consider maintenance as an integral component of transportation spending. Worse yet, they advocate for towns to borrow money in order to engage in construction. Mortgaging the future is

exactly the same borrow and spend technique that got the state into trouble. Now, Maclver is advocating for towns to borrow and spend as well?

As for the transportation needs Maclver accused town officials of lying about, the cold hard truth is that based on 2017 PASER (Pavement Surface and Evaluation Rating) ratings, 27% of town roads need to be reconstructed or be repaved; 27% need sealing; and 20% need crack filling. The current average replacement cycle for paved town roads as reported by towns is 371 years. Unless, of course, the town officials are being dishonest. Furthermore, in their 2016 report entitled No Easy Answers, Assembly Republicans tell us that “Our rural roads are twice as deadly as other roads in the state, and more deadly than the national average – and estimates suggest that roadway features are a factor in about 1/3 of fatal crashes”. Unless, of course, they are being dishonest.

The transportation chess game has been known for some time. The only question that remains is whether or not the legislature will believe in honest servant leaders in town government and finally just fix it, or if they will buy into the continued vitriolic and false rhetoric that has reached a level so uncivil that town officials are now being called liars.

Who will the legislature believe? What will the legislature do?