

Rep. Krug: A tale of two governors

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I write to tell a story. It's a story of two Governors - and one city. My city, Wisconsin Rapids.

Wisconsin Rapids is fortunate today that Governor One has announced that his Department of Transportation will support a successful grant request made to the DOT's [Transportation Economic Assistance \(TEA\) program](#). Under the project a 2,000-foot extension of industrial rail line would be created between Canadian National railroad's main-line track in Wisconsin Rapids and the new aluminum plant built by Matalco.

The rail link is a \$793,000 project that will receive a \$400,000 grant from the TEA program. Governor One [says in a release that](#) 80 jobs are being supported by the project, jobs that Matalco has already created. That's great, and in his release Governor One notes that the project will "drive economic progress, strengthen our supply chain, and create more good jobs..." "I look forward to continuing to partner together to ensure Matalco and the entire Wisconsin Rapids community's success for years to come." That's all to the good. I support Matalco and I support this project.

But this is a Tale of Two Governors. And now let's talk about Governor Two. Governor Two had an opportunity to do all this and more. Right here in Wisconsin Rapids. And he declined.

Governor Two was asked in July 2021 to sign Assembly Bill 367, the "Mill Bill." AB 367 would have done exactly what the rail project would do: It would have created jobs, made better use of an existing facility, and ensured a lynchpin of the economy here in Wisconsin Rapids and all around the northwoods would have played a key role for many years to come.

AB 367 proposed the Governor Two earmark \$50,000,000 from the state's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds for the purchase of the former Verso Paper Mill in Wisconsin Rapids. The earmark was not an expenditure, it was a loan - a loan to a qualified buyer to purchase the mill and start it back up. A buyer existed who was eager to do exactly that. It should have been a slam dunk. Instead, Governor Two vetoed the bill.

AB 367 would have put at least a couple of hundred good jobs back in place in Wisconsin Rapids. It would have reestablished a marketplace for vast quantities of softwood cut every year in Wisconsin. Since the former Verso Mill closed, one-quarter of the pulpwood cut in Wisconsin each year now has no place to go. Timber management is facing challenges as a result.

Governor Two said in [his veto message](#) that he vetoed AB 367 because he was unsure about whether federal rules would have allowed the loan. Well, in that case, all he needed to do was check with Washington before disbursing the money. That's all.

Governor Two said we should use state GPR money to make the loan instead. That would have been more costly to the state since GPR isn't the one-time federal windfall the legislature suggested be used in AB 367. But apparently Governor Two had a point to make.

Back to Governor One for a moment. The new rail link project being touted by Governor One is being helped along by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) which is providing up to \$1.5 million in state income tax credits to Matalco based on job creation and capital investment at the Wisconsin Rapids facility. Again, that's all to the good.

Governor Two may have been worried that the loan under AB 367 needed a partner to oversee the project. Well, he had that. AB 367 would have involved WEDC as well. The "Mill Bill" would have empowered WEDC to make the loan to the buyer of the former Verso mill and would have put WEDC in a position of assisting the redevelopment of the mill for its new role. If WEDC involvement is desirable, Governor Two could have had it in the repurposing of the mill - if only he had signed AB 367.

But Governor Two did NOT sign the Mill Bill. He vetoed it. He said Goodbye to a chance to use federal funds to reestablish a major employer in Wisconsin Rapids.

He said Goodbye to bringing a couple of hundred good new jobs back to our community. He said Goodbye to helping recreate a market resource for vast amounts of Wisconsin pulpwood. In essence, he said Goodbye to Wisconsin Rapids and to the state when he vetoed AB 367.

And now for a plot twist you already see coming: There is only one Governor. Governor One and Governor Two are the same person. That person is Governor Tony Evers, who today touts a modest success for Wisconsin Rapids even while he no doubt hopes we will all forget his much bigger fumble of a much bigger prize last summer.

One final plot twist. The Governor can still fix this. He is actually empowered to earmark ARPA funds on his own. He doesn't actually need a bill to pass. I call on him to do so. It's not too late.. not yet too late for Governor Two to step up and be more like Governor One.