

Gov. Evers: Announces initiatives to build 21st century infrastructure, expand high-speed internet, improve roads, highways, bridges

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MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers tonight, during his 2023-25 Biennial Budget Message, announced key infrastructure initiatives to ensure Wisconsin's infrastructure is prepared to support a workforce and economy of the 21st Century. The governor is proposing to make critical investments to build 21st Century infrastructure, invest in expanding access to reliable, high-speed internet, and continue the governor's work over his first term improving Wisconsin's roads, highways, and bridges.

Gov. Evers again proposes to make the largest investment in high-speed internet in state history to ensure the state is doing its part to meet broadband expansion goals by the end of 2025. Additionally, after improving over 5,800 miles of roads and nearly 1,600 bridges during the governor's first term, Gov. Evers' initiatives include the highest level of funding ever into general transportation aids, which go directly toward helping local counties and communities repair and maintain local roads. The governor also proposes increased investments to build out electric vehicle infrastructure, prevent reckless driving, and bolster the supply chain while also using a portion of the state's surplus to pay down state debt in transportation revenue bonds. This action will ensure the state is spending less taxpayer dollars in the future paying on debt and interest to continue focusing resources on road improvement and maintenance.

In his 2023-25 biennial budget message delivered tonight, Gov. Evers continued to unveil his plans to bolster the state's current and future workforce, maintain

economic momentum, and ensure Wisconsin's infrastructure is prepared to support a workforce and economy of the future:

“Giving working families a little extra breathing room is just one key part of our plan to bolster the middle class, maintain our economy’s momentum, reduce barriers to work, and address our state’s workforce challenges. But we have a lot of work to do together to keep building our economy from the ground up.

“Let’s start with making sure our infrastructure is prepared to support a workforce and economy of the 21st Century. No administration in state history has done more to expand access to high-speed internet than we have. We’ve allocated more than \$340 million to ensure more than 390,000 homes and businesses will have new or improved, reliable, high-speed internet. That’s a big deal, folks.

“But in this century, nearly everything about our economy, our workforce, and our way of life depends on access to reliable high-speed internet. And the longer it takes to get everyone connected, the more costly it becomes for our state to catch up. We can’t afford not to keep our same pace. In fact, we need to double our efforts.

“So, I’m again proposing to make the largest investment in high-speed internet in our state’s history. I’m asking the Legislature to join me in supporting a \$750 million investment into Broadband Expansion Grants, so the state is doing our part to meet our goal of getting every Wisconsinite, every home, and every business connected to reliable, affordable, high-speed internet by the end of 2025. We have to do it, folks. And together we will.

“Part of ensuring our infrastructure is ready for a 21st Century workforce and economy is building upon our work over the last four years to improve over 5,800 miles of roads and nearly 1,600 bridges. I’m also proposing the highest level of funding ever into aid that goes directly toward helping local counties and communities repair and maintain our roads to do just that.

“We’re also investing in key projects across the state, from the Ray

Nitschke Memorial Bridge in Green Bay to the Blatnik Bridge in Superior. And we're expanding transportation alternatives in our small communities, building out our electric vehicle charging infrastructure, and re-engineering roads to improve safety and help prevent reckless driving.

"These investments will be critical for bringing our infrastructure into this century. At the same time, we're still balancing these investments with prudent decisions to prepare for future economic uncertainty. So, we're going to use a portion of our state's surplus, not to create more ongoing expenses, but to reduce them. We're going to pay down \$380 million in state debt in transportation revenue bonds. That means we'll spend less of your hard-earned tax dollars in the future paying on debt and interest so we can stay focused on fixing the darn roads.

"Investing in 21st Century transportation and infrastructure is essential to prepare our workforce and our economy for the future, and we have to start right away. ..."

The governor's comprehensive transportation budget proposal also prepares the state for its future by proposing two new funding sources for the state's transportation fund and utilizing federal funding to further build out Wisconsin's electric vehicle charging infrastructure, enabling the state to use \$34.5 million in federal funds over the biennium, along with potential state funds, to allow greater use of electric vehicles throughout the state.

Additionally, the governor is building on his previous historic investments in broadband by again proposing the largest state investment in expanding high-speed internet in the state's history. Since 2019, Gov. Evers has allocated more than \$340 million to expand high-speed internet. With the help of these investments, more than 390,000 homes and businesses will have new or improved access to reliable, high-speed internet. The governor is also proposing updating the Broadband Expansion Grant Program to modernize the program criteria and create new consumer protections for broadband customers.

A breakdown of the governor's proposals to build safe, reliable infrastructure, pay down debt service, and expand high-speed internet service for Wisconsinites is available below.

Transportation

Gov. Evers understands that safe, reliable infrastructure is critical to the success of Wisconsin's economy and workforce, and ensuring these connections for local communities is essential to keeping the state moving forward. With this proposal, Gov. Evers continues his past investments in the state's infrastructure and lays a strong foundation for future investments.

Local Roads and Services

Gov. Evers is proposing:

- Increasing general transportation aids for both counties and municipalities by 4 percent in calendar year 2024 and another 4 percent in calendar year 2025, providing the highest level of funding for general transportation aids in the program's history;
- Providing \$50 million in segregated funds annually for an ongoing supplement to the Local Road Improvement Program (LRIP) to increase direct support of local road and bridge projects across the state. Additionally, increasing funding for the existing LRIP program by 4 percent in each year of the biennium;
- Increasing state support of mass transit aids by 4 percent in calendar year 2024 and calendar year 2025 to further support non-drivers' access to employment, healthcare, and recreation throughout the state. Additionally, increasing funding to programs supporting transportation for the elderly and people with disabilities, paratransit, and employer-sponsored commuting options.
- Restoring the ability of cities, villages, and towns to use eminent domain to build pedestrian and bike paths;
- Providing \$1.2 million of segregated funds annually to provide matching funds for the Transportation Alternatives Program for small communities;
- Allocating \$8 million of segregated funds to support local government administration of federal funding opportunities to support local roads, including technical assistance opportunities; and
- Allowing local governments to establish Regional Transit Authorities throughout the state as local governments deem necessary for the benefit of their residents.

Bridges and Highways

Gov. Evers is proposing:

- Providing \$47.2 million in bonding to begin reconstruction of the Blatnik Bridge

- in Superior in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Transportation;
- Providing \$50 million in bonding to support the Southern Bridge project on the Fox River in Brown County; and
- Directing \$1.2 million in segregated funds for pressing repairs for the Ray Nitschke Memorial Bridge in Green Bay.
- Investing \$77 million in the State Highway Rehabilitation Program.

Road Safety

Gov. Evers is proposing:

- Improving the safety of travel on Wisconsin's highways by providing 35.0 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions for additional state troopers and 10.0 FTE positions for motor carrier inspectors;
- Providing \$60 million to establish a new traffic calming grant program;
- Providing \$16,000 to develop and implement electric vehicle license plate stickers to assist first responders in emergency response for electric vehicles;
- Implementing Driver Licenses for All, regardless of documented status, to improve the safety of Wisconsin roads for everyone in Wisconsin;
- Restoring roadway design considerations in state law that support non-motorist infrastructure known as "Complete Streets," empowering local communities to safely integrate all modes of transportation;
- Invest \$6.5 million to cover the cost of comprehensive driver education for economically disadvantaged students;
- Require that courts order the use of an ignition interlock device (IID) for all offenses involving the use of alcohol and operating a motor vehicle while intoxicated (OWI), joining 30 other states and D.C. in requiring all offenders, including first-time offenders, to install an IID; and
- Increasing Wisconsin's seatbelt violation penalty from \$10 to \$25 to match neighboring states.

Electric Vehicle Infrastructure

Gov. Evers is proposing:

- Establishing a program to utilize federal funding to further build out Wisconsin's electric vehicle charging infrastructure. This action will enable the state to use \$17.1 million of federal funding in fiscal year 2023-24 and \$17.4 million of federal funding in fiscal year 2024-25, along with potential state funds, to allow greater use of electric vehicles throughout the state;

- Providing \$234,900 in fiscal year 2023-24, \$177,300 in fiscal year 2024-25, and 2.0 FTE positions to the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to provide consumer protection oversight of electric vehicle charging stations; and
- Modifying current law to explicitly exempt from the definition of a public utility, a nonutility that supplies electricity through an electric vehicle charging station and charges by duration or the kilowatt-hour.

Supply Chain Investments

Gov. Evers is proposing:

- Providing \$16 million in bonding for dredging, seawall reconstruction, and other projects associated with the Harbor Assistance Program;
- Providing \$20 million in bonding for the Freight Rail Preservation program; and
- Increasing the number of days that an employee of a Farm Service Industry employer can carry a seasonal Commercial Driver's License from 180 to 210 days.

Laying the Foundation for Future Infrastructure

Gov. Evers is proposing using nearly \$380 million of the state's historic surplus to pay down debt in the transportation revenue bond program, allowing funds currently devoted to debt service to become available for improving Wisconsin roads and saving the state money on future interest payments.

Additionally, the governor proposes providing two new sources of revenue to fund infrastructure improvements throughout Wisconsin and maintain a healthy transportation fund, including:

- An amount calculated from the state sales tax generated by the sale of electric vehicles; and
- A transfer of a portion of the state sales tax on the sale of auto parts, tires, and repair services.

These transfers will allocate nearly \$190 million from the general fund to the transportation fund over the biennium.

Broadband

Over the past four years, Gov. Evers has gotten to work to expand access and

affordability of high-speed internet for Wisconsinites across the state, and in 2021, he declared it the Year of Broadband Access. The governor continues his commitment to closing the digital divide by again providing the largest state investment in broadband expansion in the state's history.

Expanding Access and Affordability

Gov. Evers is proposing investing \$750 million in the Broadband Expansion Grant program with a requirement that the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (Commission) spends at least \$75 million annually on grants. This historic proposal builds upon the governor's previous record-setting investments in expanding broadband across the state and is more than four times larger than the total funding provided to the grant program over Gov. Evers' past two budgets.

The governor is also proposing strengthening the Broadband Expansion Grant Program to ensure that all Wisconsinites have access to reliable and affordable broadband service by:

- Increasing the speed threshold for broadband service for an area to be considered "served" to 100 megabits per second (Mbps) download and 20 Mbps upload and allowing the Commission to periodically update this speed threshold based on technology and market conditions;
- Requiring an area to have access to broadband service that is "available, reliable, and affordable" for the area to be considered "served;"
- Requiring the Commission to consider the affordability of broadband service in the proposed project area when evaluating grant applications; and
- Establishing a procedure for internet service providers to challenge a grant award.

Additionally, Gov. Evers is proposing:

- Creating a Broadband Line Extension Grant Program, funded at \$1.75 million in fiscal year 2023-24 and \$3.5 million in fiscal year 2024-25, to provide grants and financial assistance to eligible households to subsidize the cost of a line extension from existing broadband infrastructure to a residence that is not served by a broadband provider; and
- Eliminating several statutory restrictions for certain municipalities defined as broadband "unserved" to enable them to directly invest in broadband infrastructure and provide service to residents and allowing these communities

to apply directly for broadband expansion grant funding from the Commission.

Promoting Equity and Reliability

Gov. Evers is proposing to:

- Modify current law to create a Digital Equity program supported by funding from the state universal service fund; and
- Modify current law to protect broadband customers by requiring broadband service providers to meet certain service requirements, including prohibiting a broadband service provider from denying service to residential customers based on race or income and requiring providers to award credits to customers' internet bills based on service outages.