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As Budget Committee Prepares to Vote on Transportation, Groups Call for Less Debt, More Investment in Local Infrastructure

JFC Should Cut Questionable Highway Expansions to Pay for Road Repair, Transit

MADISON -- Wisconsin legislators could save taxpayers half a billion dollars by putting unnecessary highway expansion projects on hold, according to an [alternative budget proposal](#) released today by Wisconsin advocacy groups. WISPIRG, Sierra Club, 1000 Friends of Wisconsin and WISDOM urged legislators to rebalance Wisconsin's spending priorities by cutting waste, reducing borrowing for transportation and reinvesting in local infrastructure. The alternative proposal comes ahead of the legislature's Joint Finance Committee vote on funding for highway expansion, local road maintenance and public transit programs across the state.

After a close examination of four major highway projects statewide (Hwy 50, Hwy 15, Hwy 23 and I-90 from Madison to the Illinois border), the groups found that traffic projections used to justify these costly expansions are not materializing. By scaling back these four highway expansion projects -- and by repairing the roadways, rather than unnecessarily adding highway lanes -- the state could save taxpayers nearly \$500 million. The groups recommend using these savings to reduce the state's reliance on bonding and to reinvest in local priorities like local road repair, transit and bike/pedestrian infrastructure.

"We're charting an unsustainable course when it comes to transportation in Wisconsin," said **Peter Skopec, WISPIRG Director**. "Our problems can't be fixed simply by raising more revenue for transportation -- we have to fix our spending priorities, which have become increasingly imbalanced over the past decade. Runaway spending on unneeded highway expansions is making it harder and harder to pay for local infrastructure."

This alternative budget proposal comes just days after a [Federal Court ruled against the Wisconsin Department of Transportation](#) for using inaccurate traffic projections to justify the expansion of Highway 23 between Fond du Lac and Plymouth. Highway 23 is one of the expansion projects the advocacy groups recommend scaling back.

[Skyrocketing increases in spending on costly major highway expansion projects](#) have led to an incredible 400% growth in debt service as a portion of the state transportation budget over the past 15 years. At the same time, funding for local road and bridge maintenance has declined, leaving crucial infrastructure -- particularly in rural areas -- to crumble: today, 38% of Wisconsin's local roads are in need of immediate repair.

"Wisconsin needs a more responsible budget alternative," said **Elizabeth Ward, Sierra Club John Muir Chapter**. "We should be sure to invest our limited transportation funds in the most critical priorities while looking for savings wherever possible. And we have to take a particularly hard look at multibillion-dollar investments in major highway expansion projects, especially since Wisconsinites are driving less." As statewide transportation trends change and infrastructure throughout Wisconsin crumbles, demands on the state's transportation budget are growing. The proposed 2015-17 biennial transportation budget recommends increasing bonding for transportation to a total of \$1.3 billion for the next two years, while failing to address crucial transportation needs -- particularly at the local level.

"Highway spending has increased at the cost of local roads. The state has been dramatically increasing spending on highway expansion by taking away the reimbursements that had been promised to communities for local road repair," said **Steve Hiniker, Executive Director of 1000 Friends of Wisconsin**. "Every journey begins and ends on a local road. We need to make sure that those roads are safe and our alternative budget makes the investments needed to improve local transportation needs. We cannot afford to neglect these roads and our alternative budget makes the investment needed to bring local roads back into good condition."

"The transportation budget must reflect the changing demographics of the quickly growing senior and young professional populations increasingly looking for transit, bike, and pedestrian options in our state," said **Stephanie Gyldenvand of the interfaith organization WISDOM**. "With over half of transit rides connecting workers to jobs, cutting transit funding hurts both employers and employees."

The highway expansion projects the groups recommend scaling back, including total savings and traffic count analyses, as well as reinvestment proposals, are below. The full alternative budget paper can be found [here](#), and a PowerPoint slide deck that summarizes the findings [here](#).