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"Why transit options help"

By Scott Bernstein

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Patrick McIlheran's Feb. 13 column "Helping travel, forcing moves" misses the point that you can choose how your public money is spent and what you get for it. Keep thinking "transportation = roads-only," and you can expect to pay more for the cost of living and an incomplete tax base. And federal stimulus funds can speed up Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee commuter rail plus other local transportation improvements. Here's why.

We all relish choice. Offering transportation choices to southeastern Wisconsin residents will improve both quality of life and regional wealth for generations to come. And transit investment can reverse population outflow while attracting more people to the area's community centers.

Places that offer mass transit not only increase their real estate tax base; they hold their value better than the market at large - even during recession, which helps pay for basic amenities such as schools. I'll bet that regional leaders aren't breaking out the champagne about the net out-migration or the difficulties in attracting and retaining professionals, either. Respected sources such as Moody's Economy.com <<http://Economy.com>> have raised the warning bell on this trend. Economic success requires the availability of urban amenities such as mass transportation.

While McIlheran curiously equates choice with "oppression," by offering - not limiting - transportation choice, people will save money on their daily expenses and increase local investments. We drive too much when it's our only real choice. Research shows that when transportation choices are offered, people choose the most cost-effective option.

The areas cited by McIlheran around Kinnickinnic and Oakland avenues is a good example among many of how better transportation services helped cities and developers to produce lasting value.

Before judging it "very expensive" to build commuter rail, consider what you pay now. Southeastern Wisconsin families pay \$8.5 billion out of pocket to own and operate cars, businesses \$5.5 billion and government \$1.5 billion annually. Over 30 years, you pay a half-trillion dollars. KRM and tandem bus and streetcar services pale by comparison, and they bring back many times their initial cost in growing and recurring benefits.

The region's tab is high because it lacks alternatives. A household driving 25,000 miles per year pays 66% of its income for housing and transportation. A household driving 15,000 miles pays 56.5 % of its income for that - a 10% increase in disposable income, tax-free, at today's prices. When gas returns to \$4 a gallon, transportation will cost more than housing.

You could miss these savings if officials don't pass new Regional Transit Authority legislation, blend existing Milwaukee County funds with other funds for a true three-county system and use the new American Renewal and Reinvestment Act - \$600 million for Wisconsin highways, streets and public transit, plus last-minute appropriations for Amtrak and new high-speed-rail services.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers and the Urban Land Institute report that investors and developers seek better development choices. Rather than giving up on the suburbs, it means offering urban choices regionwide. This annual study finds consumer preference for mixed-use, infill, transit-oriented development (TOD) centered at commuter rail, light rail, heavy rail, streetcar or electric trolley bus systems. And it shows investment bypasses southeastern Wisconsin because you can't offer TOD without the "T." As a result, metro Milwaukee rated 53rd out of 63 major markets.

KRM will reconnect metropolitan Milwaukee to the larger economy much more enduringly while creating greater local value. That's not a cost.
It's an investment you can't afford to avoid.

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