

OUR TRANSIT GRIDLOCK

MARK KASS

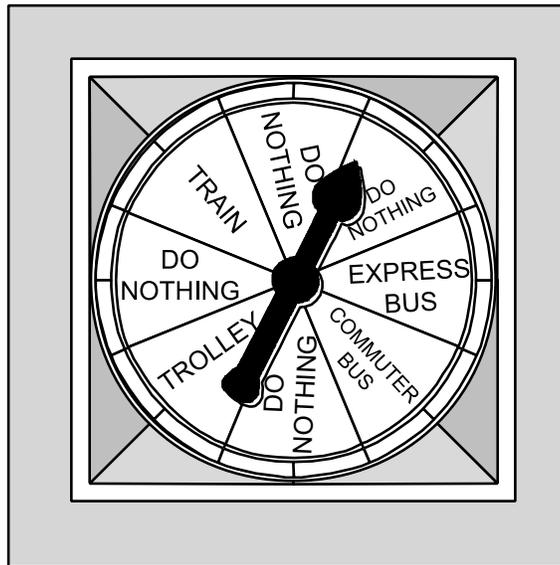
It's so rare when a politician fails to spend tax dollars that it normally grabs front page headlines.

But in the case of southeastern Wisconsin, where political and community leaders have let \$91.5 million in federal transit funds sit unused for more than 15 years, it barely has raised eyebrows among Milwaukee-area residents.

"It is unbelievable that these funds have sat unused for this long," said Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett. "It's embarrassing that we haven't spent the money. As a community, we are leaving a lot on the table, which could hurt our future growth. We need to get something done."

What is ironic about Barrett's statements is that he was in Congress, as a representative from Milwaukee, in 1991 when he lobbied to get the money from the federal Department of Transportation for transportation needs in southeastern Wisconsin.

"I can remember working to get this money, feeling that it would make a difference in the Milwaukee area's transportation system," he said. "But I never thought it would take this long just to figure out how to use it."



"We have to bring this pimple to a head. My obsession is that I don't want to lose the \$91 million. We have a lot of mass transit needs in this community."

Long road

Originally, the \$91.5 million was part of \$289 million appropriated by Congress in late 1991 to build a lane reserved for express buses next to

Interstate 94. But neighborhood opposition from West Allis and part of Milwaukee sidetracked that plan.

Over time, the funds were cut to \$241 million by the federal government and reserved for public transit. A 1997 plan was to use the money to help add bus and car-pool lanes to the Marquette Interchange and the east-west stretch of I-94, build a light rail system, and expand bus service. But opposition to both light rail and freeway expansion sank that plan.

Amazingly in 1999, Governor Tommy Thompson, Milwaukee County Executive F. Thomas Ament, and Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist actually agreed on a plan. The state,

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city and county agreed to apply \$149.5 million toward rebuilding the Marquette Interchange and the 6th Street Viaduct, razing the Park East Freeway, and building a lakefront walkway. The remaining \$91.5 million was earmarked for the results of a study on a downtown connector transit system.

The 6th Street Viaduct was rebuilt, the Park East Freeway razed, a lakefront walkway near Summerfest was built, and the Marquette Interchange reconstruction will be completed in 2008. But the remaining funds still sit unused.

The connector study ended up dropping light rail to pursue guided electric buses, but new Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker opposed that system.

In 2003, Norquist joined Walker in asking to spend the money on KRM trains that would link Milwaukee with its southern suburbs and with Racine and Kenosha. But with Norquist leaving office, Governor Jim Doyle wouldn't agree to change the 1999 deal.

Just last year, Barrett and Walker cited financial questions in vetoing resolutions intended to push forward a guided electric bus system. Attempts to override the vetoes in both the Milwaukee Common Council and the Milwaukee County Board failed.

In the past few months, Barrett came back with another plan that would use the federal funds and tax incremental financing to establish a three-mile downtown streetcar loop.

The streetcar would run on a rail along Fourth Street, Juneau Avenue, St. Paul Avenue, and either Jackson Street or Van Buren Street. It would connect the downtown Milwaukee Amtrak train station to much of the rest of downtown. The project recently moved into the preliminary engineering phase with the support of three of the four members of the Milwaukee Connector study committee, comprised of representatives of the city, the county, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce and the Wisconsin Center District.

Walker quickly opposed the plan, saying the rail-based system lacked the flexibility of a bus, and its route would not serve most of the people who need mass transit service.

"The transit-dependent population are predominantly (living) in the central and northwestern part of the city of Milwaukee," Walker said. "To me, mass transit should be a means of getting people to and from work and to and from school."

Barrett wanted to spend the other half of the \$91.5 million in federal funds on new rapid transit buses with two routes, one from Wauwatosa through downtown to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and another from the Midtown neighborhood through downtown to General Mitchell International Airport.

Walker responded with his own proposal that he called the "Smart" plan that would connect people who are dependent on the transit system to jobs and to job training centers and make the system more attractive to current and future riders.

The system would have two lines—one that would go from the regional medical center, down Wisconsin Avenue, past Marquette, through downtown and up to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus. The other would go from Bayshore Town Center, over to 27th Street, down through the west side of downtown Milwaukee to the Northwestern Mutual campus on the south end of the county.

"New technology and upgrades would reduce travel time by 25 percent," Walker said. "In contrast, the city of Milwaukee plan would use \$52 million to construct a trolley car rail system that covers a three-mile radius in downtown Milwaukee."

Also joining the fray was County Board Chairman Lee Holloway, who wants express buses and a regional commuter bus depot.

The commuter bus terminal could be combined with the Milwaukee County Transit System's existing Downtown Transit Center, which is "highly underutilized," Holloway

wrote in a recent memo to other supervisors. Other possible locations are the intersection of N. 27th St. and W. Wisconsin Ave., where Walker's proposed express bus routes would intersect, and the Milwaukee County Grounds, he wrote.

Bus option

Walker has long supported using the money for regular buses, but current federal restrictions on the money have been a barrier. He said a top staffer for U.S. Representative Jim Sensenbrenner told him agreement among city, county, and state officials would be needed for Congress to lift those restrictions.

The bus system, operated by the Milwaukee County Transit System, is facing a serious financial crisis. A report issued recently by the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) said the bus system will likely need to make severe cuts in service and will have to raise fares significantly by 2010 if current state, federal, and county funding trends continue.

Several aldermen and county supervisors believe the best way to save the bus system is to provide a dedicated funding source so that it is not competing with other county departments for property tax revenue. Some have backed a sales tax increase, saying it would provide the funding source needed for the bus system, would reduce property taxes, and would bring in revenue from people visiting and using services in Milwaukee County.

However, Walker is adamantly opposed to increasing the sales tax for the county bus system.

"The bottom line is there are a lot of people out there with new ways to spend our money," Walker said. "The bus system, long-

term, needs support beyond where it's at. I'm one of those guys that believe we don't need to be taxed more. My fear is that would drive people and jobs out of the county."

Barrett said he opposes a sales tax increase unless some of the funds are used for public safety needs.

No strategy

So today we sit no closer to spending the money than in 1991, much to the anger of local politicians.

"It really is ridiculous that we can't spend this money," Walker said. "But everyone has their own issue and we just can't seem to get together on it."

Interestingly, Milwaukee government entities face no deadline for spending the money, which would require a 20 percent match from local governments. The money sits in a federal account in Washington, D.C., earning no interest for Wisconsin. The federal government has given no indication it will allocate the money to another state if it is not used, but

most political observers believe that will have to happen at some point in the near future.

"They just can't let it sit there forever and not be used," said a political source. "There are so many communities around the country clamoring for federal funds for a highway project or a bridge project. At some point, they are going to give it to someone else."

What is ironic for several political observers is the criticism in recent years that Wisconsin representatives in Washington, D.C. have not brought home enough federal funds for local needs. In fact, Wisconsin ranks towards the bottom of all 50 states.

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"Why should our politicians fight for funds if they are not going to be used," the political source said. "They have to use bargaining chips to get those funds and if they are just going to create fights back at home, they probably don't think it is worth their time or effort."

Political mess

H. Carl Mueller, a Milwaukee public relations executive working on the transit issue, said the failure to use the money shows a "dysfunctional relationship between local, county, and state governments."

"It is a classic example of how government should not operate," said Mueller, who was chief of staff to Norquist in the early 1990s. "The public expects their governmental officials to figure things out and get them done. But in this case, it has not happened."

Mueller said politics is the art of compromise, but in the case of the transit funds it has become "the art of opposing everything."

For example, anytime Barrett proposes a solution to use the funds as he did this spring with his streetcars in downtown Milwaukee, Walker opposes it. If Walker or Holloway proposes using it for the financially strapped County Transit System, Barrett will oppose it.

Then you have other regional leaders, such as Racine County Executive Bill McReynolds joining Walker in opposition to any new taxes to help a transit project.

For his part, Doyle has decided to stay out of it and let the local leaders try to work it out.

"I'd like to have a local solution here, not one imposed by the state," Doyle said. "I really want to be part of the solution. I want to work to develop a modern transportation system in Milwaukee."

Meanwhile, the money keeps sitting in an account in Washington, D.C.

"I think it is fair to say that this is not happening in any other city in the country,"

Mueller said. "I bet there are politicians in other states laughing at us for not being able to spend the money."

Light rail's fault

Mueller and other leaders blamed much of the discourse and distrust on Norquist's proposal to use some of the funds for light rail in the 1990s. There was such opposition from Milwaukee-area suburban Republicans and talk show hosts that it quickly bogged down the issue then and still today.

"John went after the suburbs on light rail and really got into a fight, the scars of which still last today," he said. "There was so much anger on that issue. You could have a calm discussion with someone about abortion, but you start talking about light rail and people would start yelling and screaming."

Norquist's abrasive and demanding style when it came to most issues, especially light rail, also irritated suburban and county leaders, who thought he was trying to get them to pay for a system that would mostly benefit city residents.

"He had a way of making you feel like he was jamming it down your throat," said a suburban leader. "He was all about getting it done for the city, which was his job, but he did not take the larger view of what was in the best interests of the community."

Barrett has brought a different approach to the mayor's office, one of cooperation and working with suburban leaders on regional issues, but he has been unable to bring a deal together on transit.

"It is something we've worked hard on and I am hopeful we can get something done," he said. "But it is difficult because of the history on this issue. There are a lot of scars."

Will it ever be spent?

Can an agreement ever be reached to spend the money, given the enormous amount of anger and politics that exists with the transit issue?

"We need to develop an urban transit strategy that helps connect the city to itself and to the region," said Tim Sheehy, president of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce. "We are one of the few large metro areas in the country lacking a dedicated funding source for mass transit. Our inability to reach consensus on a downtown connector system in the last two years has left us without a strategy and \$91.5 million in federal funding sitting on the sidelines. The time for a strategy is now."

Mueller said it will take a good politician, one who is a leader that can get both sides to compromise and come to an agreement.

Currently, there is no politician who is willing to try and with Walker and Barrett up for reelection in April 2008, it is unlikely they are going to try and push through a controversial compromise.

That may mean the leadership could end up coming from the business community, Muller said, because of the need to solve the transit issue for the future economic growth of

southeastern Wisconsin. The Greater Milwaukee Committee and the MMAC have made transportation a priority for both organizations.

"If it has ever been possible, it would be now because of the consortium of the business community that has gotten involved in this issue," Mueller said. "They understand the importance of getting something done. Hopefully, they will be able to overcome the political quagmire this has become and we can finally spend this money."

Steve Hinniker, executive director of 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, an environmental group, said the city still lacks a healthy mix of transit options.

"Unlike Portland, Seattle, San Diego, St. Louis, Minneapolis, or other cities enjoying new growth, Milwaukee has no real plans for a 21st-century transportation system," he wrote in a May 2006 op-ed in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. "In order to sustain new development, Milwaukee needs to start developing an integrated transportation system immediately."