

SUMMARY REPORT FOR THE 7TH ANNUAL



Sponsored by the Urban Economic Development Association of Wisconsin

Transportation & Jobs: The Case for Regional Cooperation Getting There From Here



The 7th Annual Community Development Summit explored the vital need for regional cooperation, with special emphasis on the closely linked issues of achieving effective transportation and job growth. Approximately 225 participants from across Southeast Wisconsin took part in this event including government, business, community and economic development leaders, and the general public.

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett kicked off the meeting with welcoming remarks and brief comments on the Summit topic. **The Mayor acknowledged that Milwaukee is behind the times when it comes to transit, and emphasized the need to adopt a comprehensive transit strategy that employs the \$91.5 million in federal transit funds designated for our area that has been unused for 17 years.** The Mayor outlined a plan for the use of these funds that integrates all transit modes, strengthens the current system and focuses on attracting new riders. The components of the plan include a central hub at the Inter-modal Amtrak station in Downtown Milwaukee; augmenting and upgrading the buses of the Milwaukee County Bus Rapid Transit system (COMET); the Downtown Circulator, a rail-based system to improve movement around all major employment centers and downtown attractions; and Heavy Rail, to be incorporated into the Inter-modal hub downtown and will include the proposed Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee (KRM) commuter rail system, linking the region to the Chicago metropolitan area.

Immediately following Mayor Barrett's remarks, **Portland Metro Councilor Robert Liberty provided a compelling case why regional cooperation on transportation and workforce development is needed in Southeast Wisconsin** and explained how it can happen based on Portland's experience. Mr. Liberty described the creation, evolution and achievements of the Portland Metro Council, which was created in 1979, and is the only popularly elected multi-jurisdictional regional government in the United States. The Metro Council's jurisdiction encompasses 1.4 million people, including 24 cities and parts of three counties and its primary responsibilities are regional land use and transportation planning. He described specific regional transportation initiatives carried out by Metro, including funding mechanisms, decision-making processes and planning efforts. Mr. Liberty challenged critics who maintain that this kind of regional institution cannot be replicated in other metropolitan areas, including Milwaukee.

Following Mr. Liberty's presentation, **a reaction panel of regional experts active in transportation and workforce development efforts in Wisconsin discussed the**

challenges and opportunities facing Southeast Wisconsin in terms of regional cooperation. Panelists agreed that there are good regional transportation plans in place, but there has been a lack of political will to implement them. The intersection between workforce development efforts (addressing skills and spatial mismatch), with access to housing and transportation planning creates a difficult dynamic. Risk-adversity and the challenges around funding are two key factors; communicating the long-range vision versus the short-term difficulties is necessary. The connection from the needs of the business community to the general public needs to be made so elected officials can support the investment required to implement a regional transportation and transit system. All panelists agreed that a more progressive approach is needed that moves beyond the negative rhetoric used in the past.

The afternoon Town Hall included a discussion among local elected officials and business leaders, moderated by WISN Anchor Mike Gousha. Panelists agreed that the current transit system in the region is antiquated – geographic boundaries do not necessarily apply to how people use the system to get around. Again, risk-adversity and a lack of “can-do” attitude are two big hurdles to regional cooperation. There is a need to find points of agreement among elected officials in the region; what are the action steps that could be carried out together that would build trust among politicians? Bold leadership is necessary, but the impact of the media on public opinion and efforts underway is an important consideration.

Following the Town Hall session, participants were given the opportunity to question panelists on how they will work towards increasing regional cooperation, and what they saw as the key challenges and issues to strengthen Southeast Wisconsin. Then the meeting broke into round-table discussions to allow for participant discussion and input. A summary of the issues and challenges generated during the afternoon follows.

Issues and Challenges

An overriding theme of the Summit was that a quality public transit system is crucial to the economy of Southeast Wisconsin and the region’s economic future. Participants overwhelmingly pointed to the region’s failure to develop a unified transportation policy and implement existing transit recommendations over the past 16 years. There was a strong consensus by most participants that we cannot wait any longer.

Participants recognized that a first rate transportation system is the link we need to connect workers to good family-supporting jobs available across the region. The most pressing issues and challenges identified included:

- 1. Inadequate levels of transit funding.** The lack of funding prevents the region from achieving significant transit service improvements and threatens the viability of current transit services in the region. This severely hinders our ability to connect citizens (especially those who live in areas where unemployment rates are high) to jobs in high growth areas and where they are most plentiful.
- 2. Failure to implement existing transit recommendations.** Southeast Wisconsin has good regional transportation plans already in place, including a plan prepared by SEWRPC and those with components that establish commuter

rail service connecting cities in the region (such as Kenosha, Racine and Milwaukee) to Chicago. It is a shame that \$91.5 million in federal transportation funds has remained unused for the past 15 years due to a lack of consensus.

3. **Empower and establish a permanent Regional Transportation Authority (RTA).** To date, this region has lacked political will to implement significant new transportation efforts. An empowered RTA can recommend and establish regional transportation and transit initiatives.
4. **Lack of a dedicated local funding source to fund transit.** Unlike many other parts of the country with large anchor cities like Milwaukee, we lack a dedicated funding source to fund transit in the region. The heavy reliance on Federal and State monies and local funding from the property tax has proven inadequate and precludes service improvements, necessary capital investment and expansion.
5. **Lack of consolidation of transit systems.** Each county in the region has its own transit systems, but users of the system do not stop at county lines. The lack of consolidation of local transit systems is not effective or efficient, and hinders the region's ability to achieve a first rate transit system.
6. **Greater need for public education and advocacy.** We lack an effective coalition consisting of all key stakeholders to influence the actions of local, state and regional governments on the issue of transportation. The lack of public education has left those in favor of the status quo dominating the public discussion.

Recommendations and Next Steps

There was consensus on the part of participants that success will require a more cooperative and collaborative approach to the planning and implementation of major economic development initiatives across Southeast Wisconsin in the areas of transportation and workforce.

Additionally, there was an overwhelming sentiment that in order to forward regional cooperation relating to transportation and workforce initiatives, ***there has to be a commitment on the part of elected officials*** at all levels of government to work together and come to a consensus on an approach and Plan. Key recommendations to help us get there included:

1. **Establish a transportation coalition.** In concert with launching a public education campaign, the region needs to organize a coalition consisting of all key stakeholders to push forth a policy agenda that includes:
 - Launch and implement public education and lobbying campaigns that will mobilize citizens and other stakeholders to generate the kind of advocacy needed to achieve a first-rate transit system.
 - Address the immediate crisis with public transit (including MCTS);
 - Support consensus on utilizing the \$91 million in federal funds that have continued to go unused; and
 - Identify options for a dedicated funding source supported by the coalition; and

- Develop recommendations for how a regional transit authority should be government beyond RTA.
- 2. Encourage and support regional cooperation and consensus-building among all levels of government in the region.** Work to identify points of agreement among all officials and identify action steps this group can take together on this issue. Begin advocacy as soon as possible to influence the State Legislature and Governor. This is especially timely in light of the upcoming State budget process, possible local referendums on transit funding and the reauthorization of the Federal Transportation bill.
 - 3. Strengthen the mechanisms that support efforts to eradicate barriers to employment.** In order to connect citizens to good family supporting jobs, we have to expand our transit system to help the thousands of residents who do not have automobiles travel to areas in the region where the jobs are located.
 - 4. Consolidate transit systems in the region.** As the State mandated the consolidation of school districts, the state should mandate the consolidation of local transit systems into a regional system AND empower the region to establish a dedicated funding source.

We are off to a good start and want to build on the momentum generated at the Summit. A follow-up gathering is planned for September 17th at 8:30 a.m. at Manpower. Invitations will be sent out electronically, or visit www.uedawi.org for event details and to register. At this meeting, we will seek consensus on the recommendations, discuss the pros and cons of the specifics of each proposal, and develop action steps to move these recommendations forward. We are also considering reconvening the elected officials from the region to participate in a “Wingspread-like” event that will help work towards trust-building and consensus on how to move forward with regional cooperation. We look forward to your continued and active participation and involvement.

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Please see Appendix for a complete list of presenters and panelists.

APPENDIX

2008 Community Development Summit Presenters & Panelists

Master of Ceremonies: Julia Taylor, Greater Milwaukee Committee

Morning Plenary: Mayor Tom Barrett, City of Milwaukee
Robert Liberty, Metro Councilor, The Portland Metro Council

Morning Panel: Moderator: Eric Von – Host, The Eric Von Show 1290 WMCS-AM
Rob Henken, The Public Policy Forum
Bill Mitchell, Waukesha County Economic Development Corp.
Michael Mortell, WIRED / Regional Workforce Alliance
H. Carl Mueller, SE Wisconsin Regional Transit Authority
Donald Sykes, Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board
Kenneth R. Yunker, PE, SE WI Regional Planning Commission

Town Hall: Moderator: Mike Gousha – Distinguished Fellow in Law and Public Policy at Marquette University Law School and Anchor of WISN TV's "Up Front with Mike Gousha"

Mayor Tom Barrett, City of Milwaukee
Michael Cudahy, The Endeavors Group, LLC
Bob Dennik, Milwaukee County
County Executive William McReynolds, Racine County
Mayor Larry Nelson, City of Waukesha
Mayor Christine Nuernberg, City of Mequon
Assembly Representative Jeff Stone, 82nd District
State Senator Lena Taylor, 4th District
County Executive Dan Vrakas, Waukesha County

NOTE: Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker was invited by the Summit Planning Committee, but was unable to attend and sent a representative.