

THE 8TH ANNUAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SUMMIT REPORT

*Presented by the Urban Economic Development Association of Wisconsin,
City of Milwaukee and Greater Milwaukee Committee*

This year's event followed up from the topic explored at the 2007 Summit, which discussed the vital need for regional cooperation, emphasizing how to achieve effective transportation and job growth in southeastern Wisconsin. This year's Summit focused on the vital role that a regional transit system can play in growing the economy of southeastern Wisconsin, as well as encouraging individuals and groups to get engaged and involved in ensuring our policymakers move forward with a regional transit agenda. Approximately 170 participants from across southeastern Wisconsin took part in this event including government, business and civic leaders, and the general public.

Opening Remarks

- *Julia Taylor* from the *Greater Milwaukee Committee* opened the Summit by noting we have accomplished so much in the last year to move transit forward – **this continues to be a critical time for action**. A recent study from UW-Milwaukee showed that over 40,000 people have lost access to transportation since 2001; a single Regional Transit Authority (RTA) and dedicated funding are crucial to ensure that southeastern Wisconsin grows its economy and prospers.
- *City of Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett* spoke to the progress made in the last year on the 18-year stalemate for the \$91.5million in federal funds allocated to Milwaukee County. The City now has a portion to invest in the **Streetcar Connector project, which is intended to connect residential density to employment and activity centers** in the downtown area. The proposed streetcar system will also link to the Intermodal station and local buses, ensuring that it is integrated with current mass transit systems.
- *Secretary Michael Morgan* from *State of Wisconsin Department of Administration* presented on behalf of Governor Doyle, stating that transit in southeastern Wisconsin is intrinsic to economic growth in this State. He advocated for an investment in infrastructure that creates a regional system that provides options for riders and connects to mass transit projects. **The Governor's proposed framework for RTA and funding legislation is an essential step to moving forward this fall.**

Keynote Speaker: *Scott Bernstein, Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), Chicago*

His presentation focused on the economic impacts an improved regional transit system could have on southeastern Wisconsin. His key points included:

- **A viable regional transit network is of utmost importance for growing jobs**, reducing cost of living and foreclosure risk, and promoting a thriving regional economy.
- CNT research has shown **that linking housing and transportation expenses illustrates shrinking housing affordability**. They found that in Cook County, good transit access can yield one less car per household and lower the cost of living by \$5-8,000, the equivalent of increasing income 10-20% tax-free.
- Between 2000-2008, the metro Milwaukee area saw transportation costs grow twice as fast as income, housing costs grow three times as fast and gasoline costs grow 14 times as fast. **During this time period, SE WI income gains were wiped out by the increases in fuel and transportation costs.**

Bernstein cited research data **that identified declining regional transit service as a key contributor to southeastern Wisconsin's low status** when compared to other places to live and do business:

- In October 2008, Moody's Economy.com noted that **southeastern Wisconsin's key weaknesses include a lack of mass transit** and good inter-city links, low economic diversity, weak migration trends, and a deteriorating housing market among other things.
- However, **this region could capitalize on strengths** such as overall low housing costs and above-average per-capita income **with improvements in local transit** and approving inter-city and high-speed rail infrastructure development.

- In June 2009 **Moody's Investors Service** ranked the region **336th on a list of 392 areas in terms of employment forecasts**. With income growth slowing and an exposure to manufacturing layoffs, we need to act now to reverse these declines and fight stagnation.
- **Businesses and individuals consider good public transportation and access to quality of life amenities top determining factors when deciding where to locate**. If southeastern Wisconsin desires growth and prosperity for citizens, we must follow peer regions nationwide and invest in our current local transit systems and new initiatives that encourage economic development in the region.

Bernstein concluded by stating that “democracy means paying attention” – you have to work at it to ensure things move forward. **Southeastern Wisconsin needs to act like a region and use this knowledge to leverage better policy decisions more consistently**. The Region needs not only an investment in local bus systems, but also significant mass transit projects that generate private financing, organize development, reduce emissions and exposure to rising fuel costs, attract tourists and occasional riders, and operate better in pedestrian environments. **Better transportation policies not only accommodate volume, but they increase the economic value of housing and community**.

Discussion Panel

Steve Jagler of BizTimes Milwaukee moderated a panel of business and civic leaders from the region who discussed transit and its impact on their organizations or businesses and included: **Deborah Blanks** (CEO, Social Development Commission), **Eric Isbister** (CEO, General MetalWorks Corporation), **Karl Ostby** (Chairman, former Southeast Wisconsin Regional Transit Authority), **Jeff Van Koningsveld** (President of IBEW Local 430/Co-Chair of the Racine County Labor Coalition), **Wallace White** (Chair, African-American Chamber of Commerce of Greater Milwaukee) and **Edward Zore** (CEO, Northwestern Mutual).

The group covered the following key issues related to regional transit, job creation and economic growth:

- Transit is about access and opportunity for thousands of people who want to be a part of the growth in southeastern Wisconsin but cannot. It is a key connection to prosperity.
- Business growth in this region is throttled by a lack of transportation options – they have a difficult time accessing future employees.
- Transit is a key connection to the opportunities for higher education that are dispersed throughout the 7-county region, particularly as our state seeks to create workers for a global economy.
- The key issue is mobility – a regional system requires flexibility to meet the various needs of people who live, work and visit there. Moving people efficiently creates value in a regional economy; transit is a signifier and a way to welcome new business, travelers and visitors.
- Infrastructure investments create jobs, but they are also a way for this region to maximize its assets. We cannot just consider the cost of these investments – what potential opportunities will this region lose out on by not investing in transit, such as a decreased tax base and stagnant business growth?
- How can we re-engage the citizenry on this issue? Although not everyone may rely on public transportation, it is important to consider those that do, such as those with special needs, or companies that rely on transit to bring employees to and from work each day.
- The needs and problems need to be stated clearly – show the economic benefits of transit, not just the quality of life aspects. Building a coalition of common interests is a key way to mobilize individuals; need to keep the message simple but make it statewide.
- We also need to reach out to elected officials at all levels – we have experienced a “crisis of leadership” for too long on transit. Offer to support them through candidate forums and provide them with public support for their efforts on the issue; get Federal legislators involved to demonstrate the Federal support that could be gained through implementing an RTA and dedicated local funding.
- Inaction over the past three decades represents a significant loss of economic opportunity for southeastern Wisconsin – a regional approach is crucial to preserving what we have built but to also move forward and grow.



Interested in learning more about how you can help build a vibrant, modern regional transit network in SE WI? Join the Coalition for Advancing Transit and get engaged in the issue!

Contact UEDA at (414)562-9904 or Kristi@uedawi.org for details.

