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Audit Hearing Highlights Problems and Way Forward with Transportation by Senator Kathleen Vinehout

“Deputies are trying to figure out what caused a bridge on a rural road west of Arcadia to collapse.” The WEAU-TV story broke the same morning as a recent Legislative Audit Committee hearing on the State Highways Program.

As horrifying as the bridge collapse was, the story highlighted problems locals, others and I warned about for some time. Summer storms and floodwaters weakened older roads and bridges. State funds for local construction and maintenance did not kept pace with costs.

The recent audit, conducted by the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB), shined a light on long-standing problems with the Department of Transportation (DOT). Many lawmakers, including myself, advocated for this audit because an analysis of DOT programs has not been conducted for many years.

Road conditions have gotten worse over five years (2010-2015). Using information from the audit, I calculated 38 Wisconsin counties have less than 5% of local (concrete or asphalt) roads rated “good”. Using the “International Roughness Index” measure of road conditions, Wisconsin ranked lower than six Midwestern states and the national average.

Sixty percent of Pepin County’s state highways rated “poor” or worse than “poor”. The state road through the village of Pepin is so bad that dandelions sprouted in the cracks. Village officials asked me for help after they were told the DOT could not help with paving – even though this state road is slated for repair.

I met with DOT officials and requested money for Pepin and over a dozen other road projects in western Wisconsin. I received the same answer I often hear, that it is a “local decision” and assistance to deal with the “local problem” was not forthcoming.

Highway commissioners and town supervisors tell me that pushing blame onto local officials without sending additional local resources is a problem that got much worse in recent years.

Auditors reported similar findings. For example, 70% of county highway commissioners who responded to an LAB survey indicated roadway maintenance funds for state highways in 2015 were “less than adequate”.

The audit contains two very interesting charts of county road conditions. I reviewed the proportion of state highways in “poor or worse” condition. I discovered half of the counties ranked in the top twenty-five percent as worst in the state were in the western Wisconsin and included EVERY county that touched the Mississippi River.

When I raised the issue of how money was spent by region of the state, newly appointed DOT Secretary David Ross could not answer me.

The audit did highlight solvable problems within DOT. Secretary Ross shared his willingness to accept all the audit recommendations and to work on fixing what he could right away.

But many of the problems are serious institutional issues related to the way DOT does its work and will not be resolved by the time the Legislature passes the 2017-19 state budget.

Our transportation fund has an imbalance that worsened in recent years. Projections show by the end of the next budget, nearly one in four dollars spend on transportation will go to pay debt – leaving less money available for roads and bridges. Delaying some projects is inevitable but every delay only drives up costs.

Governors of both political stripes paid for this transportation debt from the general fund. Governor Walker used more than \$900 million of the General Fund – over three budgets – to pay for transportation projects and debt. This transfer left less money in the general fund to pay for needs like schools, the UW System and local government.

Robbing Peter to pay Paul should no longer be an option. Spending more and adding unsustainable debt cannot be the ‘go-to’ option again.

To fix the transportation fund we should improve efficiencies. The Audit Committee introduced a bill to adopt the legislative considerations in the audit. We will keep careful watch on the progress of the department and its new secretary and require periodic written reports.

However, efficiencies alone will not provide all the help needed to fix the deteriorating roads, bridges and other transportation needs of the state. Lawmakers should revisit the revenue options detailed by former DOT Secretary Gottlieb and figure out how to fix the long-term problems we face.