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Mayor's streetcar double-down doesn't match up with his claim on jobs priority

Statement of Alderman Bob Donovan January 14, 2014

In a recent interview with the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Mayor Tom Barrett said that creating more jobs in Milwaukee is a priority. In this respect, I am certainly on the same page as the mayor. However, it was very discouraging to hear that the mayor will continue full steam ahead on the downtown streetcar, despite minimal public support and considerable public opposition to the project. Further, when we have so many other more serious and pressing issues – public safety, homicides and gun violence, co-sleeping deaths and joblessness, just to name a few – why on earth does the mayor think this is a priority?!

I believe that the time has come to put an end to this nonsense and reallocate funding for the streetcar to more pressing needs, most notably connecting Milwaukee residents with available suburban jobs and stepping up the pace of repairing crumbling city streets.

The bulk of the capital costs of the Streetcar are to be paid with \$54.9 million in federal Interstate Cost Estimate (“ICE”) funds allocated by Congress to the City of Milwaukee in 2009. According to Senator Ron Johnson’s office, it would be possible to reallocate these federal funds to be used for other purposes. Governor Walker, County Executive Abele and the mayor would all have to agree to the redirection of funds. Therefore, I am calling on all three to promptly pursue reallocation of the federal ICE funds.

And for what should the federal streetcar funds be reallocated? A recent report by the **Public Policy Forum** highlighted the “spatial mismatch” in metro Milwaukee’s job market: most available jobs are located in suburban areas not accessible by public transit, yet the city residents who could fill these positions often do not own automobiles, making it difficult or impossible to get to the jobs they so desperately need. As noted in a *Journal Sentinel* article on the Public Policy Forum report, studies have shown that the Milwaukee region as a whole has gained more than 120,000 jobs since 1980, while the number of jobs in the city itself has fallen 14%. In addition, a report by the UWM Center for Economic Development found that as many as 40,000 Milwaukeeans lost access to jobs in the 2000s because of funding cuts to transit services.

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The *Journal Sentinel* article also reported that the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board at times has thousands of eligible candidates for available jobs; yet few of the unemployed workers will apply for these jobs if they are not accessible by transit. At the same time, as described in the example of a Mequon manufacturing firm, suburban employers struggle to fill entry-level positions because qualified candidates for those positions often lack reliable transportation.

In my mind, it is abundantly clear that we must make a concerted effort to address this issue. To make suburban jobs more accessible to Milwaukee residents, I am proposing that \$34.9 million of the federal funds for the streetcar be reallocated to initiatives to improve access to suburban employment. For instance, this money could be directed to the Milwaukee County Transit System to extend routes, purchase buses, increase service frequency or make other improvements that would help Milwaukee residents reach suburban employment opportunities. Alternatively, the reallocated funds could be used for other innovative transportation strategies to better connect the unemployed with suburban jobs.

The remaining \$20 million of the federal streetcar dollars could be used for another jobs-related initiative, namely the City of Milwaukee's street paving and reconstruction program. While more local funding has been directed to fixing Milwaukee streets in recent years, the city is still woefully behind in terms of bringing the bulk of its streets up to an acceptable condition. Not only would this additional funding lead to safer, smoother streets for all Milwaukeeans, it would also create meaningful employment opportunities for unemployed Milwaukee residents – in locations that they could reach with or without automobiles.

The mayor has repeatedly said that he is working to bring more jobs to Milwaukee. But over his tenure, there have been few specific, sustained actions or accomplishments in this regard. That said, I would encourage the mayor to get behind the plan just outlined – namely, to reallocate the federal streetcar funds to job-connecting transportation initiatives and to job-creating city street projects.