

Vote boosts 39/90 expansion

By WHITNEY HELM Staff writer | Posted: Thursday, November 5, 2015 4:00 pm

MADISON — By a 10-6 vote, the Joint Committee on Finance has approved \$350 million in additional funding for transportation, a key move to accelerate the I-39/90 widening project.

The approval reduces delay in the 39/90 project from two years to one year, funding state road work with an additional \$200 million this year in general obligation bond authority and \$150 million next year.

Rep. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit, said he was happy with the funds going through. Just weeks ago, he and U.S. Congressman Mark Pocan spoke to media in Beloit about the importance of funding transportation.

"I hope it's not the end," said Spreitzer.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker came to Beloit on Oct. 22 to press the case for reducing delays in widening Interstate 39/90 from the state line to Madison.

"It's important for safety, economic development and is important for retail and tourism. We need to see it done," said Walker.

The Interstate 39/90 expansion began in 2015 with bridge and other work and extends 45 miles from the Illinois state line to Madison. As part of the project, all lanes will be widened to three to four lanes from Beloit to Madison. Currently, it's only two lanes in each direction, although there are some parts near Madison where it is extended to three lanes. According to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, all of the 11 interchanges and bridges have outdated design features and contribute to safety concerns.

The 2015-2017 biennial budget reduced spending for the Majors Program by \$242 million or 33 percent when compared to the 2013-2015 biennium. The Majors Program funds high-cost rehabilitation and large capacity projects on the state highway system. The program reduction brought two-year delays for five major highway projects including: US 10/WIS 441 (Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties); WIS 15 (Outagamie County); US 18/US 151 Verona Road (Dane County); I-39/90 (Dane and Rock counties) and WIS 23 (Sheboygan and Fond du Lac counties).

"The I-39/90 project is absolutely essential to the economies of Rock County and Janesville," said Rep. Debra Kolste, D-Janesville, in a press release. "I am thankful we have taken a step toward

getting it off the ground. I am worried about borrowing for these purposes and fearful that funds will be taken from general revenues."

Local businesses and chambers of commerce also sent a letter to Walker in support for releasing of the funds in October.

"...It has a direct impact on businesses, tourism and our image and branding. Businesses need the assurance that their products can travel to market safely and quickly. It's estimated that visitors spend over \$1 billion each year in Dane and Rock counties on food, lodging and shopping. Moreover, right now it's one of the first things that you notice when driving in from Illinois, the fact that the highway goes from three lanes into two ... that and the fact that it needs to be redone. Not to mention the interchanges; the one for Milwaukee Road is practically a death trap," said Tim Dutter, executive director of the Greater Beloit Chamber, in an email.

"This is phenomenal news for Beloit, both in terms of public safety and economic development," said Beloit City Manager Lori Curtis Luther.

Sen. Janis Ringhand, D-Evansville, also said she is pleased with the results of the vote.

"Today's action marks a step in the right direction for the I-90/39 highway project. The additional funding will reduce the delay in the I-90/39 project by one year. I will continue to press for long term funding solutions for our transportation program and to fully get I-90/39 back on schedule. It seems like every day we read about an accident on I-90/39. So far this year there have been 322 accidents, 80 injuries and 3 fatalities on I-90/39 in Rock County through August. The cost of delaying this project is just too high," said Ringhand in a press release.

Rep. Amy Loudbeck, R-Clinton, who is a member of the Joint Committee on Finance, said in a press release, "My vote to release \$350 million of bonds, which was already approved as part of the 2015-2017 State Budget, will allow the I-39/90 expansion and other critical infrastructure projects to move forward. This bonding will help us bridge the gap between revenues and expenses, but is not a long-term solution. I remain committed to working with stakeholders on a funding solution that is adequate, equitable and sustainable. I am hopeful that we can continue the conversation on what a long-term solution might look like, so that we have some consensus going into the next 2017-2019 budget."

Still, it was Democrats who provided majority Republicans the votes they needed Wednesday to approve the \$350 million in borrowing for major road construction projects across Wisconsin.

In a rare bipartisan vote, four Democrats joined with six Republicans on the Legislature's budget-writing Joint Finance Committee. All six Senate Republicans voted against it.

But despite Democrats' vote, they said Republicans who control the Legislature and Gov. Scott Walker need to come up with a long-term solution to funding transportation.

“The majority party, but more so Gov. Walker doesn’t have the guts to do the right thing,” said Democratic Sen. Jon Erpenbach, of Middleton. “And the right thing is to raise revenue.”

In 2013, a bipartisan transportation commission recommended increasing the gas tax by 5 cents per gallon, raising other transportation fees and using a mileage-based vehicle registration system. Walker refused to raising the tax without an equal cut in taxes elsewhere, leading to the reliance on borrowing.

That refusal, despite his own transportation secretary calling for a higher gas tax, was because of his presidential aspirations, Erpenbach said.

“The man has to lead. He can’t just borrow and then leave town,” Erpenbach said. “We need to do something other than what we’re doing today.”

Democrats suggested that Wisconsin should follow the lead of neighboring Michigan, where the Republican-controlled Legislature this week approved a 7.3 cent gas tax increase and a 20 percent hike in vehicle registration fees to pay for improving deteriorating roads and bridges.

GOP senators who voted against the borrowing agreed with Democrats’ concerns, said Republican Sen. Alberta Darling, co-chair of the committee. She pledged to work with Democrats to create a sustainable transportation budget.

“It’s time to look at this unsustainable transportation budget,” Darling said. “It’s time to say we can’t go on spending and spending and spending ... We think the trend lines are unsustainable.”