

Results of Focus Group Assessments of Transportation Financing Options

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Results of Focus Group Assessments of Transportation Financing Options

Introduction

During the summer of 2012, at the request of the Department of Transportation (DOT), researchers with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center (UWSC) conducted four focus groups on matters related to transportation in Wisconsin. Specifically, the groups explored motorists' assessment of highway pavement and congestion conditions, their preferred future scenario of transportation in Wisconsin, and their willingness to pay to support that future scenario. The groups provided a setting in which a cross section of the state's motorists could respond to a series of questions relating to transportation in the state. This report summarizes the results of those groups.

NOTE: A fifth focus group was conducted with users of a local transit system. Results of that group are presented as an addendum to the report.

Conduct of the groups

Interview questions were developed through a collaborative process between personnel at the DOT and with personnel of the UWSC. The groups were moderated by Ed Nelson and Jordan Petchenik. Each group was digitally recorded and from that recording verbatim transcripts were prepared. Content analysis and reporting were done by Nelson and Petchenik.

Focus group questions were pre-tested with five well-travelled motorists. Based on those interviews, modifications were made to question wording and presentation of materials. Four focus groups were conducted with licensed motorists aged 25 through 65. Groups were conducted in Madison, Brookfield, Oshkosh and Chippewa Falls. A total of 26 motorists participated in the groups. All participants were recruited by the UWSC via a telephone interview scripted to ensure required participant attributes (licensed to drive, age range, and frequency of driving). At the conclusion of each group, participants received an honorarium of \$50. Each group lasted approximately two hours. A fifth focus group was conducted in Stevens Point with regular users of

the local transit system. Participants were identified and recruited by the local transit coordinator. Participants ranged in their mobility; two utilized wheel chairs, two were visually impaired, others varied in their ability to drive. Eight people participated and each received a \$50 honorarium at the discussion's conclusion.

The discussions all followed approximately the same format:

- Driving habits – how frequently and where participants drive;
- Transportation alternatives – how participants would get around if their vehicle was not available;
- State highways travelled – highlight on map state highways travelled; highways participants particularly like and those where problems have occurred;
- Highway conditions – assessment of highway pavement and congestion;
- Highway qualities – attributes which participants value;
- Outstate comparisons – how Wisconsin state highways compare to those in other states;
- Cost of driving in Wisconsin – participants calculate cost based on miles driven plus vehicle registration;
- Transportation future scenarios – discuss three scenarios for the future of transportation in Wisconsin; identify the most appealing scenario and any unacceptable scenarios;
- Possible funding mechanisms – preferences for and objections to various funding options in support of the participants' desired scenario;
- Concluding thoughts on the topic.

A note on focus groups

Focus groups consist of a small group of people (typically five to ten) usually sitting around a table discussing a topic under the direction of a trained moderator. The discussions typically last between one and two hours. They are relaxed, informal, and generally enjoyable for the participants. The format allows participants to relate their experiences and express their opinions and feelings. During the discussion they have the opportunity to listen to others, to compare their experiences and ideas, and to interact with one another.

Surveys, which isolate respondents, and which also limit their answers to closed-ended questions, do not provide respondents with this flexibility. On the other hand, as a method for collecting information, focus groups have their limitations. They generate narrative rather than numerical data; insights rather than statistical generalizations. These are standard cautions that must accompany any focus group report. Note, however, that certain themes may recur in ways suggesting that they may be widespread.

Direct quotations from the focus groups are included in this report. The quotations appear in *italics* and have been inserted to add further context to researcher interpretation of what the motorists had to say.

Discussion highlights

Participants in these groups rely entirely on their personal vehicles. They use them to get to work, to run errands, to visit friends, and to vacation. Most feel that they have few practical alternatives to driving. For them, their cars and the roads they drive them on constitute the “transportation system.” Deprived of their cars, they say they might try taking the bus, calling a cab, walking or, most commonly, calling a co-worker or relative and begging a ride. They see none of these as sustainable alternatives to driving.

Overall, participants pay remarkably little attention to the condition of the roads on which they drive and complained relatively little about the congestion they encounter. They appear to take the state’s highways for granted. They only notice exceptional conditions: when the roads are really rough or have been recently resurfaced. In general, they rate the state’s highways as good to fair. Participants also noted improvements in the state’s highways (the Marquette interchange, for example) and feel that Wisconsin’s highways are superior to those in adjacent states. All have had at least some experience with congested roads and highways. They tend to associate such congestion with rush-hours, holidays or possibly the aftermath of a special event like a baseball game. Drivers in the Madison and Milwaukee groups were, unsurprisingly, more likely to experience and report congestion than those in other parts of the state. Most have evolved coping mechanisms: they avoid driving at the peak of rush-hour or they shift their routes from highways to back streets.

When it comes to what they pay to drive on the state's highways few participants could come close to a correct estimate. None of them had given any thought to what it actually costs them. They know that they pay an excise tax on gasoline and a registration fee but they haven't computed the annual cost of such taxes and fees. When asked to make an estimate their answers were on the high side: often twice what they actually pay. When they actually calculate the costs they're often surprised and pleased. They regard the state's highways as an excellent value. They are also unaware of any need to increase revenues to preserve and enhance highways. Participants are prepared to pay more to keep what they have. We detected little anti-tax, anti-government sentiment in these groups. To be sure, they want their money spent efficiently and worry that the Department of Transportation is not practicing the sorts of efficiencies that the times have forced on their households.

Towards the conclusion of the conversation, moderators presented drivers with three likely futures for the state's highways (capacity management, preservation, status quo). Almost everyone opted for a future that improved the condition of the highways, even though this was the most costly (for them) option. They did not regard letting the state's highways decline as an option. When it comes to paying for these improvements, there was little enthusiasm for toll roads, which they associate with Illinois. Setting up such roadways would entail building costly infrastructure and paying tolls would impede the flow of traffic. Similarly, a tax on vehicle miles travelled struck most as too "big brother." They don't want the government to know where they are or what they're doing. They seemed most comfortable with the familiar: excise taxes and registration fees. Excise taxes are nearly invisible. Incremental increases over time in both fees and taxes would likely be the most acceptable means of paying for the future they prefer.

To be sure there were hesitations and concerns. Their tax dollars might get lost in DOT bureaucracy, or the money they pay might go to support highways in other, heavily populated parts of the state (Madison and Milwaukee). While they want the state's highways maintained, participants expressed little sympathy for buses or trains. They have little interest in paying for modes of transport they don't like or don't use. Finally, participants in several groups urged the DOT to take the public into its confidence and explain the situation to them. This would lay the groundwork for any possible increase in fees.

Daily Travel

Participants rely on their cars to get to work and run errands.

Participants rely entirely on their automobiles. They use them to get to work, run errands and, on weekends, to take longer road trips to visit family or friends.

Participants drive their cars to work.

I drive to work every weekday....

Basically I'm going to work every day. I don't travel on the highways to get to work. It's a 10 to 15 minute drive.

I'm a teacher so during the school year I'm traversing a 14 mile track back and forth and back and forth.

I work in town and I have a seven minute commute and I have to go over Highway 41 every day and go through four roundabouts.

I drive from out of town to work every single day.

I only live a little over a mile from where I work, so I drive to work I have the easiest commute you're ever going to find.

They also use their cars to run daily errands.

...driving back and forth to work which is about 12 miles from my home and then when I get home from work, usually three or four times a week, I'll go run errands for my husband – go to the feed mill, go to Farm and Fleet.

For work and to run errands on the weekends.

I get my kids to school which is city driving and then I hop on the highway to get downtown to go to work, five days a week.

Drive back and forth to work every day. It's not that far from my house. I live 15 blocks from work. But I go to the store like two or three times a week.

On weekends they drive to visit family or friends. During these trips they typically traverse state highways.

I have family outside of town and we plan a trip to go to Madison where we have friends so we'll be hitting the highway then.

I also have family in Illinois so I'm traversing 90/94 or 41 to go see them. We just took a road trip to Kentucky and I do most of the driving.

We have kids who live in Minnesota and a cottage up north so we're behind the wheel quite a bit.

I go and see my son in Marinette, that's really far. I take 94 to 43 and 141.

On weekends I go out of town. I have family that lives in Fond du Lac so I go 41 or 45. I'm a transplant to Oshkosh so a lot of my friends aren't here so we usually have to travel. We do a lot of far-away driving like Milwaukee and I was just in Eau Claire this weekend.

My best friend lives in Fond du Lac so we go down there quite often. My husband has nine brothers and sisters, everywhere from Madison, Beaver Dam, Green Bay, everywhere. There is always a baptism or a graduation and 62 nieces and nephews and we're traveling to these almost every weekend. So we do use the highways all the time.

On weekends we drive down to his mother's in Tomah.

I drive back and forth probably three or four weekends a month, to get my son from Stevens Point.

Alternatives to Driving

Drivers have few, if any, alternatives to driving their vehicles.

Moderators asked participants how they would get to work if their car didn't start. Most said that they would contact a friend or a co-worker for a ride. Others thought that they might walk, ride a bike or even take the bus. Some would simply be stranded. It was clear, however, that they viewed these as temporary expedients and that they had few reliable alternatives to driving their cars.

Some would be stuck at home.

Make the phone call to work – I'm not coming in. Buy a 30-pack. I can't walk to get there and I'm not going to take a bike out and bike to work. If it was an emergency they would come and get me.

I live in Blackwell and there's nothing out there. I don't even know if taxis come out there.

Some would call a friend for a ride.

I would call a friend and see if they could pick me up. I live about 20 minutes from work. I don't have a bike to dig out.

I'd call my friend Susan and make her take me.

Some would take the bus.

I'd take the bus.

I have had to catch the bus before but that's been awhile.

I catch the bus twice a week, the Milwaukee transit system twice a week.

Others viewed a bus ride as a possible, if inconvenient, alternative to driving.

I probably could [take the bus]. But since I don't ever take the bus, I wouldn't put the effort into finding out if I could and how to even get there. I would be so late at that point someone could pick me up if they needed me.

It's too far to walk and where I live on the bus route it would take me an hour, by the time I got my transfer, I'm on the end of my route and I'm on the end of the next transfer so I'd have to do the complete circle to do it. My drive is literally only seven minutes from door to door.

I would take the bus if I had to ... The bus would be a last resort.

I used to bus everyday to work because I worked downtown ... and it was really convenient to my house. [So you could take the bus?] I could.

Some might call a taxi or walk, because taking the bus would take too long.

I would probably call a taxi or if I could dress warmly enough I'd probably walk. It isn't that far. It would be faster to walk than wait for the bus. The bus can take an hour or two hours unless you got one right then.

I either pay an arm and a leg for a cab to come way out in the country where I live and take me to town or you ride your bike. Or you walk.

This person could walk to work or the store but would be unable to travel across town.

I either wouldn't go or, if it was a workday, the school where I work is only four blocks away, so I could walk. Also, there's a grocery store within five or six blocks. I could pretty much walk. If I had to go across town, I probably just wouldn't.

Bikes are an alternative, albeit a dangerous one.

I have ridden my bike to work but it's scary because there's very little shoulder. So many people ride on the sidewalk up here I just find that strange. I don't trust the drivers.

Pavement Conditions of State Highways

Most rated pavement conditions as fair or good.

During the discussions, participants reviewed photos of various pavement conditions (Appendix A) ranging from excellent to poor and then commented on the state of the highways they drive. No single assessment prevailed. Their ratings ranged from excellent to poor. Drivers only seem to notice the pavement when it's superior or substandard, otherwise they don't appear to pay much attention to it. In the words of one participant: "Boy, that's tough. Can we run out and look?" Some think that heavily traveled highways receive more maintenance and have better surfaces than those in more remote parts of the state. Several participants noted that their driving experience is mediated by the car they drive: a good car takes the sting out of bad pavement.

Poor pavement conditions.

I was saying highway 51 would be under the poor condition.

I can think of certain places that are poor on Highway 56. I had been driving them for years and wondering why they don't ever repave them. Or 164 south of Big Bend, to highway 36, is a terrible road. It's poor.

They note that some of these are being repaired or resurfaced.

A lot of what I used to think of as bad is being fixed. Highway 43 going down to Beloit used to be really bad and now a lot of that has been repaved.

Fair condition.

I drive a lot of them that look like the fair condition one. Parts of 124 do, too.

I would say highway 151 – parts are good and parts are fair.

I think they're fair. I do see where they've been patched and trying to make an attempt to keep them up to par. Most of them are in fair condition according to this.

I would say excellent to good condition are the ones I'm usually on. Once in a while I take 124 up to Bloomer and that is a fair condition road. Fair to maybe poor even.

I'd say fair. I drive a fair condition road every day – it goes right in front of my house.

Excellent or good conditions.

I pretty much drive interstates – 53 and 94 – what I drive is excellent I would say.

I rarely encounter poor conditions. The excellent condition would be the major thoroughfares down to Chicago, east to Milwaukee. I think the vast majority of my experience has been on good to fair. But there are some excellent roads.

I haven't seen any poor conditions on the roads lately... everything seems to be pretty good, or at least good.

Some people only notice extremes – when the pavement is really good or in really bad shape.

I think I only notice when it's excellent. 'Oooh, this is so smooth.' Or when it's horrible. I don't think I take notice when it's right in the middle. I appreciate it when it's really excellent. I can't really think in the recent past when I've thought about poor conditions as much as I've thought about how nice when it's nice and new and smooth downtown or driving to Madison recently, it was really new and that was a treat.

Drivers notice those areas that have been repaired and repaved.

That stretch from Milwaukee to Beloit, Highway 43, is nice and smooth now. If you're coming 894, heading east, and you want to go downtown, since they opened that up, like the tunnel, that's all smooth.

These drivers encountered severely buckled pavement on the interstate.

The highways are really bad. This year they've been horrible. I actually put out the whole front end of my car and had to pay \$1,500 to have it fixed. It got so hot the pavement buckled, well, we hit one in the middle of the night and it took out the front end of my car. I was not happy.

Highway 94 has really sucked this year, bad. There's a lot of road work. And the buckling in the roads; it's not been good.

Pavement conditions decline on less traveled highways in the more remote parts of Wisconsin.

I suppose it got a little sketchy as I got closer to Cable as I got way, way up north. I think 53, as I got more north on 53, was a little, recognizably, not such great shape.

Well, it depends on which ones they maintain more often. Highway 94 is always getting worked on and 53 – but you get to 124 up north, it's pretty good between Eau Claire and Chippewa Falls but then when you get farther away, it goes downhill from there. I think that they maintain the busier roads better.

Drivers notice, and try to avoid, chronically bumpy highways.

I think, I remember the ones that go bump, bump and try not to go that way.

Segmented concrete surfaces aren't as smooth as asphalt ones.

I left the state in 2000 and came back in 2006. I remember the highways being real smooth, like asphalt versus what they have today, segmented concrete. You can hear it. I get it. I know why they did it: it's easier to replace segments rather than replace a whole stretch of the road. I like the smooth cruise [of asphalt] versus the clunk, clunk.

The roads on the way up to Eau Claire were ... white and had lots of lines ... made my car sound weird. You wonder if you have a flat.

Driver awareness and assessment of pavement conditions depends, in part, on the car they're driving.

It depends on what kind of car you've got. If I'm driving that big tow truck the fair condition is like terrible, the good condition is terrible driving that tow truck. [So experience of the pavement is mediated by the vehicle you're driving?] Oh yeah. Depends on what kind of car you've got and tire pressure and stuff like that.

I think that depends on the quality of your car – with a newer and better car you can drive on some awful roads and not be aware of how poor that they are. I went from an early 90's Hyundai hatchback with no shock absorbers to a larger vehicle. [So your ride changed as a function of your vehicle?] Sure.

City streets in some communities seem to be in tough shape. State highways come off well by comparison with community roads.

If you're from Milwaukee or West Allis, the city streets are so terrible that any state highway is a great improvement.

Finally, offering an overall assessment of highway conditions in Wisconsin, these drivers summarized the opinion of many participants:

Roads in Wisconsin are pretty good overall – a driver's utopia that we still kind of enjoy. People in Europe pay by the liter, still kind of a motorist's paradise compared to the rest of the world.

This weekend I drove to Wausau and then over on 52 and 45 and back on 64 so I had a really good look at the state's highways, including county trunks when I was up in Langlade. And, boy, driving up on 39, four-lane highway, beautiful, well kept up, I'm traveling 75 miles an hour with no problem. Get up to Wausau in good town, zip through the beautiful city of Wausau and then take a county trunk 52 until I hit 45. All the highways are looking great. They're looking in good shape. Nice fresh asphalt on some of the county trunk stuff. Wonderful system.

Congestion on State Highways

The severity of congestion varied across communities.

Moderators passed out pictures showing different degrees of congestion (Appendix B) and asked participants which ones they commonly encountered. In general, participants were more aware of, and concerned about congestion than about the condition of the pavement. They readily identified the degrees of highway congestion they encountered on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, congestion is more pronounced and problematic for drivers in Milwaukee and Madison than those in Chippewa Falls or Oshkosh. Drivers have evolved strategies to cope with and avoid congestion. They avoid rush hour by leaving for work early or take back streets rather than major highways.

Congestion in Milwaukee

Drivers in Milwaukee appeared to confront severe, chronic highway congestion.

Every morning. 894 is terrible. Going from ... to the zoo, that stretch of 894 is congested.

I'd say [levels] E and F. I got off I94 and chose to drive through the city, already the congestion coming from Oconomowoc, I think it was 164, already to drive downtown, at 5:15 in the evening, I was like 'I would rather just get off this highway' and I did.

I would say [levels] E and F depending on the time of day. It's usually about 4:00 or 5:00, during those times, they get real crowded and we have bumper to bumper and everybody's got an attitude.

Congestion varies by time of the commute.

I use the expressway to go to work and don't start until 9:00, and leave at 3:00, it's more like a [level] C. I know when I worked full-time, I worked by Northridge, I chose to start work at 6:00 in the morning and get off at 2:30, it would take me half an hour extra long to get home if I started at 6:30.

Early in the morning, or when it's time to get off work, and everybody is getting off, that's when it's all happening.

Rush-hour in Milwaukee is getting longer – it's now a rush-hour and a half.

It does seem to me that the rush-hour is stretching. I don't know if it's the varying time that people are going to work, I don't know what it is, it seemed like it used to be from 4:30 to 5:30, now it seems like it's longer, like it's stretching out.

Milwaukee's rush-hour has become multi-directional.

Rush-hour in Milwaukee is more of a two way thing, too. When I was a kid I lived near the freeway and it was pretty much one way: all downtown in the morning and all out of downtown in the afternoon. Now it's kind of the same or just as much going both ways, like as many people coming out of Milwaukee to work in the suburbs as come from the suburbs to work downtown. You can't avoid it: going the opposite way doesn't matter. It's like a two-way rush-hour and it's worse than it was 30 years ago, for sure.

Congestion in Madison

Madison drivers agreed that the beltline was the heart of the city's rush-hour congestion.

That's what the beltline is almost every single morning: its level F. There's the double bottleneck of getting on and, at Monona Drive, getting off. There's the one person at the top of the ramp who has to get over. They don't understand merging. And they want to get off on Monona Drive and you get a bottleneck. It's a daily occurrence.

The beltline can be impossible. Having to drive from Middleton to the east side daily, at 6:00 PM, it's absolutely what he was saying – always the time of day when people are going to work or coming home.

Recently I was on the beltline at rush-hour, I'm usually going west-bound and that's bad but it looks like east-bound is worse.

I'm looking at the letter E when I'm traveling home on the beltline. It gets tiring having to do it every day, but when you try to find an alternate route, by the time you factor in the traffic lights and the extra mileage, it ends up never being worth it. The beltline is the best option but that doesn't make it less stressful or aggravating. The thing is you're aware of it going in, you know it's 4:30 in the afternoon, it's going to be there and you just deal with it.

I've had really easy time shooting into Milwaukee but once you get to the [urban] area, forget about it, it gets kind of crazy, but not like the beltline. The beltline is probably the worst traffic I experience in the state.

Congestion in Oshkosh

Oshkosh drivers reported moderate congestion on some of the highways around the city.

I'm pointing to D and this looks like it's only one lane ... we go 44 to Ripon every other Tuesday morning and we experience having the slow speed behind other vehicles and an inability to pass because they're going 50.

I would say that's true for me when I go 41 to Appleton, no matter what time, slow down or occasionally stop for who knows what reason.

[Level] D. Either 91 or 116, I take them both and I live right off 91 and my business is on 91.

Congestion in Chippewa Falls

Residents of Chippewa Falls reported relatively little congestion in their immediate community.

I think mine would be [levels] B and C. A little bit of congestion but not bad.

People trying to get to work around 8:00, that time of day, so [levels] B and C.

That 53 bypass between Chippewa and Eau Claire, that's about C about 8:00 in the morning. I have to agree with them: [level] C.

When residents of Chippewa Falls drive to the Twin Cities they experience significantly congested highways.

The Twin Cities -- [level] F, all the time.

Yeah, you go up there to catch a flight at the airport, it's horrible. You have to be there at 4:00 and you couldn't even get near the airport for like an hour and that was a weekday and it was horrible.

It starts at Hudson and gets busier and once you get by 494/694, it's all congestion.

Congestion resulting from special events

Rush-hour overlapping with special events creates congestion in all communities.

When I go past Miller Park there's going to be a slow down because people coming from 41 and there's going to be a slowdown right there.

Like he said before about the Brewer's game, if there's a game, it's just madness.

The thing is you don't know when the Brewer's are playing so traffic just seems to run right in to it.

Also the Miller Parkway - the whole way it's set up. It's rush-hour and they have a Brewers game going on during rush-hour. It's congested and I really believe the state of Wisconsin highways should be four lanes. Why is it only three and two? They need to be wider. There should never be a traffic jam. This ain't Chicago, it's Milwaukee, a million people at most.

I went downtown at 3:00 on a Friday afternoon, and it was like a [level] D and that was extreme, if you're not used to driving, it's like magnified, it's more hairy and kind of nerve-wracking.

When there's a Packer game. I always get stuck in Packer traffic. Sunday afternoon, Highway 41 is solid after a Packer game. We were stuck for 45 minutes.

Only when it's road construction or when it's Country Jam or Country Fest [laughter] that's the only time. It's got to be an event that doesn't happen but once a year.

They note that rush-hour abates and the highways become passable.

I'm in sales ... at 9:00 I get back on the road and it's smooth sailing. The rush-hour traffic in the morning is terrible.

Strategies to avoid congestion

Drivers in Milwaukee and Madison try to dodge congestion by driving city streets and avoiding highly traveled highways.

I used to take the beltline home but I gave up on it, and now I take Williamson Street because there were always three or four panic stops for no reason.

I drive to West Allis four days a week because I work at the campus. I usually take the streets the whole way. Everybody goes, 'That's crazy, just go the highway, you'll be there in seconds.' But to me the highway gets so wild, everybody is zooming in front of you, they're cutting you off, they're not going the speed limit. That's why I take the streets. It takes me a minute to get there.

I live in Franklin and work in Waukesha so it takes me 40 minutes to get to work. I try it and time it. I've found different back routes to take and I have to go down Moorland now versus 894 because at about a quarter to seven to 8:15 it adds 10 or 15 minutes to the drive.

This driver noted that seasonal congestion can be heavy in remote resort areas.

If you're leaving or coming to Minocqua, all the Chicago people coming up to the north, that looks like [level] E, at the right time of day on Friday night. We were leaving on a Friday and everybody else was coming and it was bumper to bumper for probably a good 10 miles. That's a very big tourist area but that's two lanes going up there too, one each way, when you get closer it's four lanes.

Drivers' Other Worries

Participants voiced other concerns about conditions they encountered on the state's roads.

During the discussions participants raised concerns that go beyond the condition of the pavement or the degree of congestion they experience. These include the threat posed by people talking on cell phones, poor traffic engineering and signage, and dangerous stretches of highway.

Cell phones and distracted drivers

Participants in Chippewa Falls commented at length about those who text or talk on the phone while driving. Their inattention slows traffic and threatens the safety of others on the road with them. While this issue wasn't raised in other groups it's likely a widespread albeit latent concern.

The cell phone thing is huge. It's horrible.

You can be driving and the person over here, way over, like they're going to take an exit, and then hop back over and you think, 'What in the world?' And you go past them and they're like this [mimics holding a phone to her ear]. You want to hurry and get past them before they cause an accident and you'll be stuck behind them. It's just ridiculous.

I was at a stop sign just recently and there was a lady that was coming up to the stop sign and I was stopped, waiting, it was a four-way stop, and I was waiting for her to stop and she didn't stop. If I had pulled out she would have t-boned me and she was on her cell phone. And then they look at you like you were in the wrong – 'What's your problem?'

I was riding with a friend my age and she's checking to see if she got a text message. That's ridiculous. You're putting me at risk now. Put your eyes on the road and drive. But that's not a DOT issue.

I think they need to do some kind of campaign ... I'm against texting while driving because people don't realize a few seconds, you're looking away, how far you drive. And you look up and you're already over the line.

Like I told my son when he first started driving, I told him, 'That phone call is not worth your life. If you need to take that phone call, you need to pull off at the side of the road.'

I'm very concerned about so many drivers talking on the phone and texting. I've seen so many close calls and now that I'm on a scooter I really notice that.

Unsafe stretches of highway

During the discussion participants identified various highways that they regarded as hazardous.

The only thing I have the most trouble with is one on the other side of Eau Claire, going down to 90/94, that one, there's always an accident there, day or night. Right on that stretch, before you get back into Eau Claire, it's always something going on, and they're doing construction there too, now, I don't know if that's what's making it or what. But there is always an accident there.

Highway 128 is the worst road: the River Road. It runs right next to the river, it's curvy, and a lot of corners, and in the winter it's really slippery and scary ... If you get someone on your tail that thinks you're not going fast enough then they do crazy stuff like trying to get by you ... And it's a narrow road, too.

I use to work in Neenah, so I was on 41 everyday and I changed careers because I could not stand driving on that road. I had friends – one lady got her heart cut in two and she lived. So many accidents and I just couldn't drive it any more.

If you're on 41 and you want to get on 94 East to go downtown, there's a new way that you have to merge and it doesn't allow you a lot of time and I've seen people seriously stop on the highway because they have no choice but to let this person in and it's kind of unexpected. I don't think people in the far left lane of I94 East are being disrespectful. I don't think they know it's coming. It does seem to be a trouble spot.

I don't understand those purple lights in that [McKinley] tunnel going from Green Bay, it's a 40 mile per hour turn, they've got these purple lights and signs flashing. A lot of people wipe out on that part during the winter time. You drive through there you see all the skid marks on the walls. In the winter time I think that's one of the dangerous places to drive, right by the McKinley tunnel.

Lake Butte de Mort bridge. It still terrifies me.

One thing that did surprise me, there are a lot of accidents on Highway 10, so I'm always a little leery to travel on that, and I've come to the conclusion is that it's so straight and boring and people are inattentive, it just seems to go on and on, with cross traffic.

Traffic engineering – roundabouts

Many of the Chippewa Falls' participants were not fans of the newly installed "roundabouts."

They're putting one on county Highway X and it's stupid. They have a four-way stop and they don't need it. I drive that every day and there's never a problem.

They are popping everywhere and on roads where it makes no sense, there's hardly any traffic. It doesn't slow anybody down. I've seen those guys go through there, they don't hit the brakes, and they just keep going.

I think they are the craziest, oddest thing I've ever seen. When I first got here, I was always going the wrong direction.

Highway 64 was pretty good but I hate the roundabout. Stupid things. It's been there a couple years. They don't slow anybody down. They really don't.

One person thought that they were appropriate and had a function.

The one here in town, over by Wendy's makes sense, because the bridge was old. It was going to cost money to fix the bridge. So they did the roundabout instead, okay. And lights are expensive to operate.

Highway construction

Participants noted that their driving experience deteriorates where roads are being rebuilt. Hazards and confusion associated with highway repairs and construction troubled some participants.

Highway 894 South going towards Chicago: all that construction they're doing. When I'm going south and I need to go towards downtown, I have to get off the exit, go down by Ryan Road, get off, then come around, and get back on the freeway just to go towards downtown. You can't come downtown from going 45 South.

Highway 94 going to the Twin Cities was under construction a lot. You have to have that construction to get the good road, but when they're taking it apart it's bad.

I had trouble with 29 going from Chippewa to Stanley and they had those long stretches of the road where they were patching it. Now, you're driving over it, it sounds like a horse and buggy all the way up to Stanley and back.

People get lost in areas under construction.

Last time I was going to Illinois they were still doing a lot of work on it [Highway 43 South] and I found it confusing. You guys are probably thinking, 'I don't think she knows how to drive.' I would be so confused. Maybe they're making it wider. Or maybe they're making it more lanes. But I end up getting lost.

Changes in the color of pavement in construction areas can confuse drivers and make it hard for them to figure out what lane they should be in.

I know about construction. I've had three friends complain to me about the change in the color [of pavement]. It goes from white to black and it doesn't follow the lane. Everyone is like, 'Where do we go?' And so many people jerk their steering wheels, four cars ahead of me, you can see everyone's vehicle jerk real hard ... and there have been a lot of accidents in that one tiny little area. Where the black changes into the white, and if you do, you follow the white, because you're in the wrong lane all of a sudden.

Rude drivers and rubbernecking

Accidents and traffic stops cause drivers to gawk, which slows traffic.

I think the sheriff sitting on the side of the road with his lights on is the most distracting thing for drivers now. People want to see what they're doing. It's like people who stop in

a supermarket to read the little ads that's in these papers, or Esquire. They sit there and read instead of looking to see if the line is progressing or not.

I think people tend to gawk. You're in a line of traffic and you're not moving and you wonder if there's an accident in the northbound lane and you're going south, why is your whole lane stopped? Because people are gawking. Get over it and get moving because the rest of us have places to go!

I think it depicts society: the way that drivers act. It's like, let people in, take your turn, slow down, recognize a distressed driver that wants to come in the lane, and I think that drivers are just so, so rude. Let someone in. Are you going to get there 30 seconds later? I think it's gotten worse. Maybe it's just that I've been driving longer in my life but I think that people are really, really rude.

Drunken drivers

During the discussions no one mentioned the menace of drunken drivers. One person during the preparatory personal interviews did, however, raise this issue.

I don't drive at bar time because of all the drunk drivers. Especially when I'm up north. I'm always concerned about avoiding drunk drivers, especially on two-lane county highways, there's a chance there. Coming back, I left Sunday AM at 7:00 so there were only good church-going people on the road and I've got them all to myself.

Suggestions for highway improvement

Some highways simply need more exits.

More exits. It sucks when you miss your exit and you have to travel more miles so you can turn around.

Although I don't like turnarounds, but 'Oops, I missed my turn,' and I'm on this road for 15 more miles before there's an opportunity to turn around. That I don't care for.

I did that the other day – I did a 'no no.' I got on my GPS and it said get off in 19 miles. It's 11:30 at night, I just missed it, there's no other cars on the road, and I did a u-turn because I was not going 19 miles out of my way. But I thought that was insane.

Where there is road construction, space for emergency stopping should be provided.

More places to pull over. With all the construction we can't pull over. I can't pull over here – and I know it's a safety thing, emergency stopping. Sometimes it is an emergency with the kids in back, and I can't pull over. That would be my biggest concern.

Add privacy walls to some heavily trafficked highways.

Some things that other cities, New York, where I've driven, they divide the road. The beltline here, you can have one little accident on that side and the whole beltline [slows down]. You need a little privacy wall so these people can't see that.

Some question the common sense of having “stop” or “yield” signs when they're trying to merge onto a highway.

I don't understand why the state has a stop sign and a yield sign at the bottom of an on-ramp. That's when you should be trying to go faster to merge. And people are stopping. 'Don't stop! We're coming!' We're trying to get up to 65 and to me it seems foolish to have stop signs at the bottom of the ramp.

Noted Improvements to State Highways

Participants identified various improvements to the state's highways.

Marquette Interchange

Overall, participants in the Milwaukee group praised the Marquette interchange. Most viewed it as an improvement.

The new interchange is greatly improved over the old. The improvements they made really were thought out. They made it so you don't have to cross lanes as much. Everything use to be like a left-hand ramp and now it's a right-hand ramp and it's simpler ... If you're going towards downtown and then you're going to take I43 to the north, you used to have to get into the far left lane to do that, and now you get in the far right lane. It makes sense that they did it that way.

I like it. It is better. I will agree. It is improved.

I've been told it's faster. You get where you're going faster.

Despite my issue about getting onto 794, the actual exchange is certainly improved. Like you were talking about when you're heading downtown and you want to choose to go to Chicago or Green Bay, on 43 or 94, it is an improvement from what it was, it's clearer, it's not as frantic.

You don't have to cross three lanes in the span of an eighth of a mile – that's how it used to be – there were stretches where you had to get over three lanes in very little room and I witnessed several accidents in the old interchange, people doing that, it was too many lanes, too fast, and if there was a lot of congestion it was bad. It's so many roads coming together in one spot, I don't know how you'd engineer it to be perfect.

Some remain daunted by the interchange.

I want to like the downtown interchange but I don't. I come from the museum all the time and enter right at the end of it, I get on right at 794 and everyone is vying to get to whatever side they want to get and I think, 'This is the best they could come up with?'

I'm really afraid of the new highway downtown, it's a like a rollercoaster. I am so afraid. Everybody is going like 75 and I can't keep up with them and I don't try.

Other highways that have improved.

Highway 41. In the last year, now it's much better than when we first started driving it. It just flows so much better than it used to – Green Bay to 41 to Milwaukee.

Highway 39 is better now, too. It's just been worked on a lot over the years.

Drivers notice when roads are widened and the pavement is smoother.

It seems like they widened out the sides of the road [Highway 64]. You've got more space and it seems like it's not as crowded as it was. They widened the shoulders and widened the road.

Highway 29 East has gotten a lot better. It used to be a just two-lane and now its four-lane, and it's wonderful.

Highway 53 North is really nice now. It was under construction last summer and was kind of icky but it sure paid off this year, it's a nice stretch. Just nice and smooth.

I think they're better. Some of the roadwork they have done, I think they're trying to make things better. I think they work on stuff that they perceive as a problem.

I think the stretch just south of Fond du Lac and coming up, it's gotten a lot better. The exits there weren't very convenient. I think what they did was an improvement.

I like the whole highway from the Main Street exit, it's wider, the pavement condition is better, the exits are a little bit better. [So some reengineering?] Right. Especially Military Road ... to go 151 or you get off here to go to Military road – it makes more sense and it flows better and the highway across is much wider.

But I think it's better that they're making all the highways wider. We need more lanes. Because there are more cars than there were 10 years ago. I wish they would make them more smooth.

Some note improvements in engineering that includes a nod in the direction of esthetics.

You know the engineering they're doing right now, it's pretty cool, from what it used to be. It's amazing. You're seeing some history ... it will be real interesting to see how Oshkosh populates and how the highways adjust.

My seven-year old looked at the Lake Butte de Morte bridge and he said, 'Mom, it looks like the future.' And he's seven and he's noticing it looks really cool.

I know the bridges are part of the infrastructure, if you look at how they're doing the bridges now, they're not only making them more efficient and stronger, but they're beautiful and we never had truly beautiful – I'm thinking the engineering is getting to the point where it's not only functional but it's going to be cool.

This driver noted improvements in highways running north to Minocqua and south to Illinois.

They've made these arteries up to the north so now you can get up to Minocqua and other places in no time on these four-lane highways which have been dropped in, and they're a real significant improvement since I was driving up there on vacation. There's been a significant change. And even going down to Illinois, south of Janesville, those are slick highways.

When pressed on the matter of improvement, a few people commented on the plowing and salting of the highways in winter. The consensus was that the roads are “pretty good” and that they are “safe.”

I'd say the highways are pretty good. I think Wisconsin roads are pretty safe and pretty good ... They do salt the roads and do an excellent job of that.

I believe they are doing a great job and as far as the winter conditions, they do an excellent job on that.

How Wisconsin Highways Compare

Most participants think that Wisconsin's highways are better than those in other states.

Despite the drawbacks and difficulties previously identified, participants generally like the state's highways and view them as superior to those in other states. Their criteria for making this judgment includes superior signage, smoother pavement, absence of trash and litter, less congestion, quality of rest areas and whether or not the greenways are mowed.

Wisconsin's roads are generally better than those in other states.

I think they're better. I think the roadside where they mow – I think they do it more often in Wisconsin than they do in other states. Signage is also better, I think. Sometimes, other states' roads are pretty darn rough, their interstates are pretty bad.

I've heard we've had some of the best roads in Wisconsin, like the truck drivers love it when they get to Wisconsin because of our road system, the quality of our roads is so great. We were on a bus to Chicago and the driver was saying our roads in Wisconsin are some of the best.

In the last few years I've been to a couple different states. I've been to New Jersey and I thought the roads were terrible, in terrible disrepair. Potholes, broken up blacktop, it was just, 'wow.' It made our roads look excellent compared to theirs. This isn't about the roads, but in Tennessee and Indiana, I could furnish my house with the stuff that was on the side of the road. There are couches, there are mattresses, there's garbage, I couldn't believe that these are state highways in Indiana and they are such a mess.

Wisconsin's roads are better than those in Illinois and Indiana.

Illinois and Indiana are really lumpy. We go to Knoxville to see our relatives and traveling some of the states are quite a bit worse. It seems like, I can't remember what state we were in, my husband was like, 'If we don't need the front-end worked on now, we're for sure going to need it when we get back home.' Pretty rough.

She was talking about Illinois, I don't see where they're doing anything, anywhere. I always see the construction sign but never anyone working. You always got the construction signs up but you never see a work crew. No matter what time of day you go through.

One thing I have to say is that I go down to Illinois fairly often, and boy, you can tell right at the border, our roads are so much better maintained than Illinois'. You're paying tolls still. It was supposed to be done in 1972, you were supposed to be finished with the tolls, so they are still paying for the road and it's just crappy, most of it.

Wisconsin's roads are better than Chicago.

Wisconsin to me is much better than the Chicago loop area. Oh my God! It's just awful. You're so bumper to bumper that if somebody wants to pull up alongside of you and hit you they can. And they threaten to do so. It's just awful. I hate it. I can't go to the loop.

Wisconsin has better rest areas.

I was just going to say those wayside rest stops, if you ever use those, they have very nice ones in Wisconsin. I've been through some other states and they are not what we have here. The whole place is just kept up nicely.

Montana had a couple of rest stops that were, whew, scary. Primitive. Let's put it that way. There were a couple we wouldn't go into. Like a blue box inside of a wooden container. I wouldn't go in there.

Roads in Illinois are better

There were also those who, at least, defended Illinois highways.

People drive faster than in Wisconsin.

I actually love the Expressway and love the way people in Chicago drive, they're more aggressive. I love it because, first of all it's a lot more people and they're driving a lot faster. I used to live in Danville, Illinois and I used to have to commute back to Milwaukee every weekend. I just love the Illinois freeways.

Illinois's roads are smoother but drivers must pay a toll.

The roads here might be a little bumpier but then you get on roads in another state and they might be cushier and smooth but they got toll booths. You have tolls to pay for the smooth and cushy roads.

Illinois toll roads have improved.

The toll-ways in Illinois are better now, I can tell you that. Roads are wider and smoother and they look like this – [taps table] – but they're charging everybody. But the roads are smooth now and they re-do them every five years or so and that's better than Wisconsin because they are super smooth and they are wide.

This Tennessee expatriate pined for the highways of her home state.

I love Tennessee. It's always smooth. They're working on it, probably the same amount of time as here but when they're done it's smooth, love it. Good highways in Tennessee and Missouri. Like she said, Illinois, no. Oklahoma, you need two seatbelts on. Don't take a nap... Here it's a lot different from Tennessee. She was talking about the mowing, they are always mowing in Tennessee. Always mowing. Here I see weeds getting a little higher before they mow. But they do get on it.

Estimating the Cost of Driving in Wisconsin

Participants generally overestimated what it costs them to drive on the state's highways.

Group moderators asked the participants to estimate what it annually costs them to drive on the state's highways. This was a novel exercise for them. They had never given the matter any thought. Their estimates included the excise taxes on gasoline and vehicle registration fees but not vehicle or insurance payments. Typically, their estimates greatly exceeded what they actually pay in taxes and registration fees. They were often surprised – pleasantly – by how little it costs them to drive.

It's likely that motorists have given little, if any, thought to this matter.

It's hard for me to attach a value to something like state roads. If they [DOT] said to me, 'Like taxes, on January first you need to pay \$15,000 to drive your car this year,' I'd freak out. Because it's [taxes] just built in and doesn't have that same kind of a bill value, I can't think about it.

I never thought about it.

Driver estimates

Estimates generally ranged from \$500 to over \$1,000.

I probably pay \$500.

I'll say \$1,200 but I really have no clue.

I'll say about \$750.

I was going to say \$800.

I have no idea ... I would say about \$500

I'd say between \$500 and \$800 dollars.

[We have estimates of \$500 to \$800. Any others?]

Oh, it's more than that! [Chorus of agreement.]

More than that. I know what it cost me to drive from here to Oregon and it was a lot. And the taxes out west, it's cheaper out west for taxes but it still cost me \$1,500 ... it cost me a lot. \$800, I think.

I think it's more.

Drivers' Assessment of Value

Most felt that they got a great value for the taxes and fees they pay to drive on state highways.

This may be a rare case of taxpayers feeling that they are more than getting their money's worth for the taxes they pay. They may pay more for their cell phones and/or for Internet access than they do to drive the state's highways. When they "do the math" they're surprised by how little they pay and how much they get. This may, in part, be due to the fact that the taxes they pay are largely invisible – they pay them at the pump in small increments that they don't notice. Lump sum payments, such as those associated with vehicle registration fees, are more noticeable. One implication: fee increases folded into the excise tax on gasoline would be relatively painless compared to periodic lump sum payments that draw attention to themselves. And, as we shall see, motorists want to preserve the state's highways and their driving experience and are generally willing to pay to do so.

Motorists think that they are getting a good deal – and paying considerably less than they thought and less than they pay for seemingly less essential services like cell phones or Internet access.

When participants do the math and see what they are actually paying to drive the state's highways, most tended to be surprised and to feel that they were getting a good value for their tax dollar.

That would seem really cheap.

It's pretty cheap actually.

I think what we pay is fair. I know it's a tough job to do construction ... So 30 bucks a month and these guys go out there to their thing, as far as keeping the highways safe, it's nothing.

I do consider it a good value actually because if there's a pothole and you break your axle or whatever, like happens in Illinois, I'm an Illinoisan, yeah, you're SOL.

It's lower than I thought it would be ... I would say it's a good deal.

If you isolate it and look at it like that, if that's where the money is coming from, you're getting a good deal. It's hard to isolate and think about just that.

The cost to drive on the state's highways is a bargain when compared with what participants pay for cell phones or Internet access.

I think we're getting more than we're paying for. That's just my opinion. We probably pay more for our cell phones for our family than we do to travel freely around Wisconsin.

To put it a little more in perspective, like in my monthly budget, I'm at \$350 – less than 30 dollars a month. I think that it's really low compared to what I pay in my other monthly bills for stuff I use more. I pay about that for my Internet service ... And we all have to get places. So I think \$30 a month is nothing.

The roads are more reliable than my cell phone. That's a steal I think.

This person thinks it's a good individual value and then notes that, in the aggregate, it adds up to a lot of money and wonders where that money is going.

I thought, 'Oh, that's not much.' But, like she said, when you add that amount up for every single person, that's a whole lot of money. It really adds up. There are millions of people in Wisconsin. Where is all that money going?

One person, when asked if he was receiving a good value for his gas tax dollar, wondered just what he was getting.

I mean, what are we really getting? If you breakdown, if you run out of gas on the freeway, you're gonna get a ticket. So what are you getting? I'm just trying to figure out what it is we're getting.

NOTE: Clearly, this is something that could be explained to drivers: where their dollars go and what they receive in return.

Willingness to Pay (More)

Drivers appear willing to pay more to keep what they have.

Drivers generally appeared to be willing to pay more to preserve and possibly enhance the state's highways. They would likely prefer a method that spreads their payments out in small bits over the course of a year.

Participants volunteered various additional dollar amounts that they would be willing to pay:

I'd be fine with \$100 a year.

\$150 wouldn't bother me.

\$110 but like she said, with other states helping also.

I would do \$200 because I'd write it off anyway.

I'd go over - \$110 plus.

I'd go \$175.

I said \$100.

I said \$70.

NOTE: Often the increased increment in what they are willing to pay was less than what they estimated that they paid at the start of the conversation.

While most participants did not qualify their answers or attach any strings to an increase, two did say that they'd like any increase be managed "responsibly" and "efficiently."

As long as they are responsible with our extra money.

In an efficient manner, too. Not, 'Oh, we should just do this.' Or, 'Let's throw in a few more roundabouts.' We don't need any more of them.

In general, participants had a preference for gradual payments across the year rather than a single annual fee. Some will have a harder time finding the money for an annual fee.

It depends on how I have to pay it. It's easier to pay it in small bits at a time. Seriously, if our vehicle registration went up to \$150, I'd have to really think about whether or not we could have two cars. It would be hard for us to swing. We'd have to think about that. I do the family finances and it's hard to come up with those chunks of money, especially when you have two cars.

I would be willing to pay an increased gas tax and an increased sales tax, the stuff you don't see really.

This person would prefer not to pay more and would like higher fees to be levied on out-of-state drivers – notably those from Illinois.

I am a very cheap person. Like I said, I don't work very much. I think I would like someone else to pay it. I'd like Illinois to pay it ... If we can do that, I've always felt that way.

Preferences for Possible Transportation Futures

Participants generally embraced the future that promised significant improvements to the state's highways.

Towards the close of the discussion, participants reviewed three possible futures for the state's highways (Appendix C). Each described a possible future and an associated cost to motorists. Over the course of these groups moderators progressively revised and simplified these scenarios to aid comprehension. As a consequence participants' understanding and appraisals varied from first group to last group. For participants, coming to grips with these scenarios was the difficult part of the evening's conversation.

For brevity, the three futures can be summarized as follows:

Status quo (Minor increase – 10¢ per gal.): Annual transportation funding holds constant at current levels.

Funding does not change leading to shortfall of funds for transportation, program priorities shift and road conditions decline.

Preservation (Moderate increase – 22¢ per gal.): Annual transportation receives modest funding increases.

Modest funding increases needed. Mostly maintains current conditions although program priorities shift, conditions decline modestly with no highway expansions.

Capacity Management (Major increase – 52¢ per gal.): Annual transportation receives significant funding increases.

Significant funding increases needed. Current conditions are maintained; current highway expansion plans proceed plus some additional expansion; increased focus on other travel modes such as pedestrian, transit, bicycle, and rail.

To anticipate the discussion, most participants supported either the Preservation or the Capacity Management future. At a minimum they want to see the current system maintained and most would prefer to see it enhanced. They did not regard allowing the system to deteriorate as an acceptable option. It should also be noted, however, that none these futures seemed to inspire or excite participants. Also of note was that participants cared little for rail transportation and even less for buses; they don't ride

the train and few ever ride a bus. Neither of these two modes of transportation figured into their embrace of a particular future.

Reactions to the Capacity Management future

Despite its price tag most participants seemed inclined towards the Capacity Management future. Their reasons for this included the following:

- Because it will do something to lessen highway congestion.

The congestion is going to increase unless you do the major [increase]. That stands out because, my drive takes 40 minutes and it's going to take an hour otherwise.

- Because the other options are unacceptable.

The major increase, it's going to be the same as today. In other words, it's looking to me that we don't got no other choice but to go with the major increase because everything else is just really going to be sucky.

- Because it assures good roads and contains an element of equity.

I like to have good roads so the more major increase. The way I look at it, if you did it with the gas tax, an older person, someone who drove 2000 miles a year, won't be affected as much and they probably won't go on the expressway, or highways...

I like to have good roads so the more major increase.

- Because it is the only scenario that "fixes" anything.

The only problem is if we don't fund a major increase, with the moderate increase, nothing is going to happen, nothing is going to get fixed.

- Because the associated monthly fees seem relatively modest.

Wow, that's a major increase. That's the one I'm looking at. Why not? Do it. And get it done right but then when you add 52 cents a gallon plus the current tax, it would be 82 cents. What's that a month, \$35 dollars? That doesn't sound too bad.

When you break it down, the extra \$260 a year, that's only about \$20 a month. \$20 a month is not going to break a lot of people that's driving. It's just not that much. That's the way I look at it, \$20 a month would be worth it to me.

- Because it will decrease accidents and fatalities.

It's the only option where there is a potential for a decrease in fatalities and injuries. I'd have to put myself in that category. [Even though its \$200 more?] Yes.

- Because it keeps things the same.

The major increase is appealing to me because it keeps everything pretty much status quo and if we want to keep everything the way it is right now we'd have to bite the bullet and just do the major increase.

Reactions to the Preservation future

Some endorsed the middle future because it slowed the decline in the state's highways and didn't come with a large increase in costs to the drivers. Some imagine that as economic conditions improve that they would be open to the idea of further fee increases that would allow major improvements in the state highways.

- Simple endorsement of Preservation.

I guess I'm most comfortable with that middle ground; at least keep it stabilized, and eventually, stuff has got to improve across the board. So I'm not too comfortable with the highest one.

- It is affordable.

Number two does not seem like it's going to break me at the pump. It's going to put me over, with diesel being a little more expensive, so it's going to put me over four bucks a gallon but its been up to five where I've lived in different places. Putting it closer to five is going to be tough, financially it will.

I'm sitting right in the middle – minor to moderate. I wouldn't mind paying a little bit more but \$260 is kind of over the top. Considering that not everyone is in a hardship situation but there are a lot of people in this state, you know, where that's a big chunk of money.

Reactions to the Status quo future

Participants did not regard the first future as an option. Highways deteriorate, safety declines and fees increase. This is not an acceptable outcome.

- They are paying more and getting less.

What stands out to me is that all of these are increases. If things stay the same, things get worse. Even if we fork out an extra \$50, things get worse. That stands out to me. But no matter what, we're going to pay more and it's going to get worse.

If they are paying more they want more, not less.

The congestion will be about the same, if you pay all this money. That's unacceptable. If I'm going to pay more I'm going to want better.

General considerations related to any increase in fees

During the discussions of the various options participants made a variety of general comments and concerns about fee increases.

Acceptance of any fee increase will improve if:

- The DOT reaches out and explains itself to the public.

I think people won't have a problem with the money if you guys explain the benefits of this. Like when they built Miller Park and the sales tax they had, a lot of people from Racine, 'I don't go to the Brewer games. Why do I have to pay for that?' I think the public will be okay with it if the DOT can say, 'This is what we're doing with the money. We're doing this, we're putting it here.' People have no problem when people explain what's going on and why they have to pay a certain amount of money then you say, 'Well, I can understand that. They're borrowing money. They don't want to be in debt. Wisconsin wants to stand on its own. This is what we need.' Bring it to the public.

Point out that they've already seen the improvements that they've been able to do with the present budget. I think the motto they need is 'Moving Wisconsin forward.' That's what you want to say. And then you get to show a highway and cars on it, nice shape and then say there are your choices for how to do that.

- If it is seen as securing highway safety.

Safety and conditions. You have to have good roads to be safe.

If you go with the minor increase, you're not only looking at your driving, you're looking at emergency personnel and their driving and they're going to have to be going over those roads. That endangers not only the people driving the vehicles, but the other people on the road, because they could easily lose control of the vehicle if they're going fast over these bad roads.

There are much worse roads in other states, worse roads, and congestion is going to result in more accidents and fatalities. I think we're going to have more accidents and fatalities just from cell phones. I mean, I think anything you can do for safety makes sense. People don't care about crashes unless it's their family. But I do. I don't want people to die. I'm surprised there aren't more crashes – especially with people rubber-necking and having to get over five lanes. I think it's very important to deal with safety, there are so many more distractions when people drive and I don't think these are worse-case scenarios, I think they're logical, if we don't have the money to repair a road today, they're going to say we can put it off for five years.

- If the fee increase is associated with highway improvements where they live.

I would be willing to pay more if I saw it happen to roads that I drive or regional, district or area. Other than that, it doesn't concern me how the roads are kept in northwest Wisconsin. They should be drivable....

- If the increase in fees could be phased in over time.

When I'm looking at this, I don't like any of them either, but if it had to happen, what I would like to see is something progressive. Maybe this year start with the 10 increase, next year add that extra, so it might be like a three-year plan, to get up to the future spending, because I can't quite afford it now. It's a big chunk, it's more than I get in a raise, but if you did it over a couple years...

Reasons for opposition to any increase and concerns that would accompany any consideration of fee increases

- The state has more pressing needs than highway improvement.

Where could that other money be going from our pockets to benefit the state? Education, which is in such trouble now. So to put all that money to the highways doesn't sit well with me when so much else needs work as well. [Selects the Preservation future.]

- This person wants to see the work done, she just doesn't want to have to pay for it.

That's really hard. I would love to see everything done. I just don't want to pay for it.

- Some thought that DOT should become more efficient and "slimmed down" before they ask for more money.

Actually my first choice would be to fire one-half of the administration of DOT, kind of what they did with teachers.

- The DOT needs to “brainstorm” and tighten its belt.

I would like them to brainstorm. We need to be leaner. Everybody else has to be leaner. Holy Cow, every senator has two aides, every representative has an apartment, and they get all these benefits and stuff. There's a lot of money that's wasted in government and I just think they need to be leaner.

- Households are retrenching and economizing and the DOT should as well.

We cut our cell phones. We're cutting everything we can. We cut the newspaper. We get it on-line now. We have the basic, 10 buck a month cable, we're really trying to cut.

I routinely, at least once a year, look at all my bills. Where can I cut? Are we really using our cable? Not really. We all got cell phones and I got really good plans on all of them and I check everybody's plans – no, we got the very best deals out there right now. I compared everything recently and got rid of our landline yesterday because I don't use it. I'm paying \$20 a month for our Internet. But I do this periodically and I have to agree that I, in my own personal finances, get greener and leaner and spend less and save where I can because I'm going to retire and I have to look out for me and I have things I want to do and children that want to go to school. And I'm not making more money. In fact, I'm doing a whole lot more on a whole lot less. And I think the government has to do that too. I think they need to stop and clean house and get rid of the spending that they're doing.

- Because they don't trust government to spend responsibly.

Government spending: that's what it's in response to. Government spending, whether it's our own state, federal, whatever level it's at, we need to reel in. Perhaps there needs to be some creative thinking.

I lean more towards the status quo from the point of view of, probably pessimistic, I feel that the funding increases, I don't necessarily trust it to be spent responsibly or allocated responsibly. When you hear about someone taking someone's pension, I almost feel like leave the funding as it is and come up with innovations with money levels set where they are. I never feel quite comfortable when everything always increases, increases, increases. Yes, if that was the future that would be acceptable, that we would make do, whatever

things may deteriorate wouldn't be to the point of ruining the whole driving experience. We'd notice a little bit here or there but not enough to keep me off the road.

Yeah, kind of like he said, just because we're going to pay more, you don't always feel it's going to be spent appropriately.

- They think the DOT may just be trying to scare them.

You think about what's not acceptable: 'Warning signs are turned off as they break and are not fixed.' That's just a scare tactic to get you to pony up your money. They talk about snow removal – there has to be a surplus in somebody's budget for last year – we had a mild winter.

- Localism: none of the improvements will occur in their communities so why should they support them?

People in Illinois always talk about Chicago sucking up all the money, and Madison and Milwaukee, that's true as well, that's the big sponge for the fund. Some of the things you're talking about are probably going there. [Does that make a difference if you knew where this was targeted?] Yeah. I never go to Milwaukee because it's too far away. And if a lot of the money is diverted to there, to me, I don't need to fund that.

They're going to put off anything that they do on our roads and shove all the money down to Milwaukee and Madison anyway so it's not going to do us any good to not say okay to this.

Well, I like to know where my money is going and if they shove it somewhere I don't go, I don't think it's fair I should have to put in so much money...

This person argues against regionalism and says Wisconsin is one state and everyone benefits from improved roads arising from increased revenues.

I know there's a bus line in the works, or a transportation line between here and the Twin Cities and that's going to cost money and that would benefit everyone and I think that's a good thing. We all pay taxes. We all contribute. We're one state, no matter where you live.

- They oppose elements of any plan that include trains and buses.

That's the equity thing. I'm never going to use the train, ever. So for me, I don't want to pay for that. Or the transit availability – are those buses? We don't get that. Eau Claire has that but that's no benefit to me.

- If they don't have a problem, such as congestion, they're not supportive of its solutions.

Because it's (congestion) never happened here except for major weekends. It's kind of a non-factor. But if you live in it, you hate it.

Options for Future Funding

Participants had mixed reactions to possible funding options.

Discussing how to fund the state's transportation system was difficult for the participants. Although participants clearly understood the necessity for increased funding, they were less animated in their discussion, perhaps indicative of their understanding that they would have to pay more. Four options were presented for discussion (Appendix D): vehicle miles traveled, toll roads, an increase in the vehicle registration fee, and an increase in the gasoline excise tax. To anticipate the findings:

- participants generally opposed the vehicle miles traveled option, citing its intrusiveness and the likelihood that people would find ways to cheat the system;
- participants had mixed reactions to toll roads – some favored them because out of state drivers (particularly those from Illinois) would now help support our state's highways while others opposed them because they slowed traffic and would increase congestion;
- an increase in the vehicle registration fee was not well-received primarily because a lump-sum payment could be difficult for many motorists in Wisconsin;
- lastly, participants probably offered the least objections to an increase in the gasoline tax – they noted that on a monthly basis the increase would likely be affordable and the tax would also catch non-resident travelers.

Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT)

Participants generally disapproved of the vehicle miles traveled funding option. Their opposition to the approach included the following considerations:

- It's unduly intrusive and they don't like the idea of the government tracking their driving.

Vehicle miles traveled: it's more big brother. The cable boxes now know what channels you're watching and when you're watching. You call them and they're, 'I see you're watching channel five now.' Ridiculous.

It's like big brother is watching.

- It causes them to pay in-state for miles they put on their car while out-of-state.

I don't like the vehicle miles one because I drive a lot and last year I put on 80,000 miles, we went a lot of places last year and if I'm driving out of state, I shouldn't have to be paying for driving in-state when I'm out of state.

I don't want to be charged for my trip to Florida in my car or to Tennessee. I did put a lot of miles going to Tennessee and Florida and Jersey. Then you have to pay Wisconsin? Granted that it benefits us but that could be really expensive.

- Problematic implementation: it will be costly and people will cheat.

Who's going to pay for the transponders? And of course Jimmy down the street is going to tell you how to turn it off or take it off for half the year. It's not going to happen. I just can't see it.

The transponder thing – it would cost money for everyone to get one and I can also see people messing with it.

- VMT makes sense but people will cheat.

That makes perfect sense to me. VMT. I'd be in trouble, but then how many people are going to try to turn back their odometer? Know what I mean?

Objections to toll roads

- Some think that toll booths will simply add to congestion and slow their commute.

I don't like the toll roads because of the time. If you get the W-Pass it will be quicker but I'm just always worried about time, appointments and time, so I hate congestion, I hate anything that's going to slow me up from getting from point A to point B and having to stop and pay a toll.

I think people would be against the toll road because you have to slow down and throw your change in and now the toll roads are so heavily congested that it doesn't seem in people's heads like they function. Like, if you could keep the road flowing, 90 and 94 flowing like they are now, and have the users pay, I think that would be great. I would say the I-Pass and a toll road wouldn't be so bad.

- They don't like them because of the added hassle associated with paying and making sure they're in the right lane.

I'm very glad we don't have tolls, like when I visit my parents in Florida, go through those tolls all the time, and Chicago.

I really don't want road tolls. I don't like the idea of stopping to pay, getting change out, or having a fast pass. [Any experience with the I-Pass?] Yes, the Sunshine Pass. I just want to get on the road and go, I don't want to have to figure out which lane, 'Oh, my goodness.' I even drove through one, I didn't realize I was in the fast pass lane, so I went right through and I thought I'm going to get an electronic ticket, and at the next toll, it was, 'Here, fill this out, pay your money.' I don't like the road tolls personally.

I just don't like tolls. We're used to that in Wisconsin – that we don't have to do that.

- Some think the cost of installing the infrastructure would surpass any income.

Can you imagine how much that would cost to set that up – the buildings, the signs, we have to have the tolls running for five years, just to pay for putting them together. I think that would be so, so, so, expensive. It's building. It's structure. It's concrete. That costs a lot, a lot of money.

- Toll roads give tourists a bad impression.

People have a bad impression of Illinois based primarily on the tolls.

Given these concerns some would find other options more palatable.

I'd vote first for gas tax or registration fee – they're already in place and they're not going to cost money to make money. The miles one and tolls seem like they could cost to get going.

I don't want a toll road either ... I'm not sure what I like – I just don't want toll roads. [Is there a combination?] I'd be willing to do any of these, and I will grin and bear it if we get a toll road, I'll stay here...

I would be more irritated by toll roads than by a slight increase of one cent in the sales tax.

Support for toll roads

- Toll roads are a means of making Illinois drivers pay.

They charge us to use their roads [Illinois], why shouldn't we charge them to use ours? A lot of people come from Illinois. I will give a little to take a little. I wouldn't mind paying my state back as long as I know that everyone else is paying my state too, to build and grow and expand. Why shouldn't we have tolls? We have a lot of people coming for Summerfest and the games.

I like the tolls. I always felt that way, too. They should be helping us, too. They're using our roads, maybe there would be a cost in the beginning but it would pay off.

I guess my biggest problem is the wear and tear on the roads. [Wisconsin receives] a lot of people from out of state, I don't want to pay for Illinois people to come on vacation here so it needs to be something that everyone pays somehow ... The magic one? Well, either your gas tax or your toll roads, neither one of them are pleasant. If you have tolls then the person using that road is paying for the use of that road. All the cars that run on it and that's where the wear and tear is, and they're not appealing, but if that's how you have to pay for it...

Instead of looking at it as us paying, it's us investing in the future to have better roads.

One skeptic notes that the costs of such tolls will fall on Wisconsin drivers as well.

You're paying too, it's not just Illinois. It's not just for Illinois people.

Increase in vehicle registration fees

Some oppose increases in the registration fees which they regard as regressive with a disproportionate impact on the poor and the elderly. This inclines them towards other options.

I'd rather not see a major increase in the vehicle registration fee, because I think that would really hammer poor people or elderly people, who have to have a car, but don't drive a lot. It would be disproportionate on them. For that reason, I guess I'd lean towards the other ideas.

Place a cap on the registration fee increase.

Part of me agrees with increases in vehicle registration fees. However, I think there should be a cap on it and I don't think they should be able to keep every year charging you more and more. Look at where we started. And now we're up to, for a car, \$75.

Increase the excise taxes on gasoline

- On a monthly basis an increase would not be much and compared with other expense, much less expensive for items that are much less essential.

I'm good with the gas tax. Even if it went to the highest one. I'm still okay with it. So long as it's broken into a month. I pay more for auto insurance. I pay more with cable. When I'm paying something just for my roads, and I'm traveling every day, it doesn't seem like much spending to me.

- The gas tax catches tourists.

I guess I like the partial gas tax, the middle one, because we're going to get the Illinois people and we're going to get the EAA people, ... We're going to get money from that, too.

General considerations related to any mode of payment

- Heavy highway users should pay more.

Maybe a way where people who drive more and pay more. What you were talking about ... because someone who doesn't drive shouldn't have to be paying for the roads so much. I don't know. It's so hard.

It should be something that goes to the roads in an equitable way. Like she said, someone who doesn't drive very much shouldn't have to pay as much as a person driving 50 or 100,000 miles a year – they're putting the wear and tear on the roads.

- Endorse a mix of increases: gas tax and registration fees.

Why don't you do it twofold: increase the registration a little bit and increase the gas tax a little bit?

- People don't want to pay for services that they don't receive.

It's the equity thing. I'm never going to use the train ever. So for me, I don't want to pay for that. Or the transit availability – are those buses? We don't get that. Eau Claire has that but that's no benefit to me. Transit is more of a big city thing, and trains and all that.

- Highway spending will help the state's economy.

What comes out of it? More jobs for Wisconsin? Is that going to happen? Is that work that has to be done? If we're going to break up more rock, add more employees? If you've

got to pay a little more to create jobs, and things look nice, what's wrong with that? Isn't that a boost to the economy?

- They want safe highways.

Safety and conditions. You have to have good roads to be safe.

- They want to know where their money is going.

I know if I buy a hunting license and don't go hunting, I'm not too worried about that. Because I know that money is going to go for conservation and wildlife and our state parks and forest. Whereas I'm not really sure what our gas tax pays for. It might go toward funding some special program for the elderly.

Appendix A: Highway Pavement Conditions

Excellent Condition



Good Condition







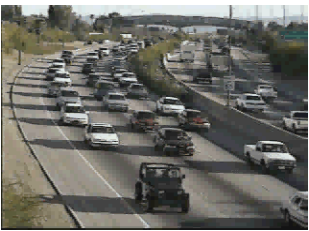

Fair Condition



Poor Condition



Appendix B: Highway Congestion Conditions

	LOS	Definition	Typical Illustration
Uncongested	A	Represents excellent conditions where traffic is flowing freely.	
	B	Represents very good conditions where traffic is flowing reasonably well. The ability to maneuver and change lanes is only slightly restricted. The effects of minor incidents are still easily absorbed.	
	C	Represents good conditions with drivers able to maintain their desired speeds. The ability to maneuver and change lanes requires more care and vigilance on the part of the driver. Minor incidents may still be absorbed, but backups can be expected to form behind significant incidents.	
Congested	D	Represents moderately congested conditions. Traffic at this level experiences moderate reductions in operating speeds. The ability to maneuver and change lanes is noticeably reduced. Minor incidents will begin to cause backups in traffic.	
	E	Represents severely congested conditions. Traffic at this level experiences operating speeds that are well below the posted limits, and there is little room to maneuver and change lanes. Traffic operations are highly volatile and unstable and even minor incidents can cause substantial backups in traffic when congestion reaches this level.	
	F	Represents extremely congested conditions. Traffic at this level could experience breakdowns to stop-and-go or bumper-to-bumper conditions. Extreme delays in travel occur when congestion reaches this level.	

Appendix C: Implications of Various Future Revenue Scenarios

Status quo (Minor increase – 10¢ per gal. – \$50) Annual transportation funding holds constant at current levels. Funding does not change leading to shortfall of funds for transportation, program priorities shift and road conditions decline.

Preservation (Moderate increase – 22¢ per gal. – \$110): Annual transportation receives modest funding increases. Modest funding increases needed. Mostly maintains current conditions although program priorities shift, conditions decline modestly with no highway expansions.

Capacity Management (Major increase – 52¢ per gal. – \$260): Annual transportation receives significant funding increases. Significant funding increases needed. Current conditions are maintained. Current highway expansion plans proceed plus some additional expansion. Increased focus on other travel modes such as pedestrian, transit, bicycle, and rail.

	Minor increase	Moderate increase	Major increase
Conditions	Pavement conditions worsen ; nearly half the state highway system will be rated in “poor” or worse condition.	State highway pavement conditions remain unchanged from today.	
Congestion	Traffic congestion increases in frequency and duration.		Congestion levels would be roughly the same as today .
Safety	Safety improvements are delayed -- crashes, fatalities and injuries increase .	Only critical safety improvements are made on state highways.	Safety improvements are met -- highway crashes, fatalities and injuries decline .
Expansions and improvements	All planned expansions and improvements are delayed 5 or more years.	All expansion projects are cancelled ; highway maintenance continues at current levels.	All expansion projects are built ; improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists.
Transit availability	Local service deteriorates unless local governments raise taxes and fares.	Transit availability remains at current level ; increased local funds needed to offset inflation .	Transit availability remains at current level ; assistance from the state increases.
Hiawatha rail line between Milwaukee and Chicago	Service frequencies are cut ; more passengers must stand during the trip; fares will increase.	Service continues to provide 7 daily round-trips ; more people must stand; fares will increase.	

Appendix D: Transportation Funding Options

Possible Mechanisms for Funding Wisconsin's Transportation Systems

- Increase vehicle registration fee
- Increase state gas tax – include various amounts
- Establish toll roads
- Vehicle miles traveled – pay for miles driven (vehicle transponder)
Based on actual use – odometer would be read so the more you drive, the more you pay.

- Other ideas? 1¢ increase to state sales tax?

Addendum: Results of the Stevens Point Focus Group with Transit Users

A single focus group was conducted in Stevens Point with regular users of the local transit system. Participants were identified and recruited by the local transit coordinator. Participants ranged in their mobility; two utilized wheel chairs, two were visually impaired, others varied in their ability to drive. Eight people participated and each received a \$50 honorarium at the discussion's conclusion.

The discussion followed an approximate format of:

- How transit users get around and where they go;
- How transit users would get around if the transit system was not available;
- Importance of the transit system to their lives;
- Convenience or inconvenience of using the transit system;
- Aspects of the transit system that could stand improvement;
- Value of the transit system relative to what users pay;
- How the transit system is funded;
- Transit users' thoughts on increased user fees;
- How the transit system should be funded;
- Establishing a regional transit authority;
- Concluding thoughts on the topic.

NOTE: Except where indicated, "transit system" or "bus service" implies both the "regular" bus service and para-transit service.

Discussion highlights

The transit system in Stevens Point is essential for the participants we met to lead productive lives. The system provides them freedom and independence to run their daily errands, to keep doctor appointments and to maintain their employment. It is the reason why some have settled in or remained in Stevens Point and why others are able to live on their own.

Riders of the transit system enthusiastically acknowledge that the value they receive is well worth the cost. The fees are reasonable and the customer service accommodates their (special) needs. Participants that drive believe that riding the bus can be more economical than driving.

As grateful as the participants are for the transit system, they readily identified aspects of the system in need of improvement. Routes should be extended both within the city limits and beyond, notably into Plover. Additional stops along the routes should be added, allowing the disabled and visually impaired to confidently reach their destinations. Hours should also be extended into the evening. Revising the schedules and routes could possibly alleviate the burden currently placed on the para-transit system.

There is little definitive understanding of how the transit system is funded. Federal and state funds, local taxes, the fare box and the University were all assumed to support the system. Some believe the fare box isn't fair – that riders of the system should contribute more than they currently do; others explained that the local economy (and thereby all residents of Stevens Point) benefits from the transit system because it allows riders to get out and spend money and keep their jobs. Establishing a regional transit authority scared the participants. They feared that tax-payers, most of whom may not use the system, would vote to eliminate the current level of services. The participants do not want to lose the transit system. They would prefer to pay more to ride the bus or to use para-transit rather than have any services cut.

Daily Reliance on the Transit System

Participants are grateful for the transit service. They rely on the regular bus and the para-transit systems to run their errands, to keep doctor appointments, to maintain their employment and to live independently.

The transit system is a “lifeline” for these participants. In the words of two participants, they are forever “thankful:”

I am thankful for the city buses, I don't know what I would do without them.

I'd like to say I'm so grateful for the city buses because I do not drive and I do not know what I would do without the city buses.

Participants rely almost exclusively on the Stevens Point transit system. They rely on the transit system the same as drivers rely on their vehicles – to run their daily errands, to visit their doctors and to get to work.

I use both the regular transit and the para-transit. Every week I go grocery shopping and I have the para-transit scheduled for that, a set schedule, they know when to pick me up and everything and at certain times I need to go up-town to Shopko – again shopping related and I'll take the regular bus occasionally visiting friends on the bus but that's not a common occurrence for me...I guess that's mostly it – shopping of one sort or another. That's my main reason for taking the bus... oh, another thing is dentist and doctors appointments, that kind of stuff, I'll use the bus for that.

I do a lot of shopping at Wal-Mart and I take the bus at least, sometimes three times a day, going different places. And also the bus,

I can get on it right in front of my apartment...I come downtown to Shopko...I still walk all the time, I do my walking in the mall, go to book-world, get a newspaper, take the bus back home, if I had to go to the store, I could just get the North Point bus, almost by the front door, half an hour later I've got my groceries back on the bus, and... [You can manage your groceries on the bus?] Oh yeah. You can get three or four bags. They put them in a little slot there or the seat next to you.

First of all I want to say, I don't know what I'd do without the Point Transit system. I've been taking the bus for 30 years and I use it primarily to go to work and I'm a foster grandmother and I work with school-age children and work at Head Start out on the west side and I also use it to go to church and sometimes to doctors appointments and all of those are very important to me and necessary things that I have to do and I don't know what I would do without Point Transit.

I've been riding the city buses now for four years. I go to doctors' appointments, I go out to the Crossroads, to the Wal-Mart for grocery shopping, I go to K-Mart on the north side of town. I even go to my dentist appointments and there's a campus bus that runs when the university is in session.

Riders with low incomes, who presumably may not own a vehicle, are appreciative of the transit service.

I just want to mention that the poor people in this town use the city bus an awful lot and we are very happy with the bus system.

The transit system is essential to maintain their employment and to fulfill volunteer responsibilities.

I wouldn't have my job and wouldn't be able to go to my job without it. [No alternative?] No, and I simply cannot afford a car. I cannot afford insurance. I cannot afford the high gas prices. I'm very, very grateful. And I don't know what else to say but 'thank you.'

I was in the same situation when I had a job and buses were the same way for me, getting me to and from work when I had a job.

When I was working and driving a car, I had no time to volunteer. Now I'm volunteering. People need volunteers...It would be nice when you volunteer if someone would cover the cost [of transportation], too.

The transit system provides the mobility they require and allows them to live independent of others.

The transit system is a “lifeline” for these participants. For some, the transit system was a reason for settling in Stevens Point; it allows them to travel throughout the city without relying on family and friends to transport them, essentially to live independently.

I would be totally lost without it...I've become a lot more independent and knowing that Point Plus para-transit was available, was a big factor in my decision and my family's, to try living on my own [not living with her sister] and I've been doing really good and I'm going on nine years... so, I use them for shopping, I go to doctors appointments, I've gone to friend's houses for the weekend. They've picked me up and taken me there and stuff. I would be lost without it. I don't drive, I don't have a license, so I use the para-transit bus. They are all wonderful people.

Like [other participant]...I'm totally para-transit. I used to ride until my head accident. It comes down to 17 years of para-transit. I do all my shopping, Wal-Mart, my medical appointments, I'd be in trouble if there wasn't para-transit. I have a long history with them and I know all the drivers.

I have no family here. I'm totally dependent on them. I'd be in trouble if I didn't have them.

If there was no transit in Stevens Point I would strongly think of moving somewhere else...That was, transportation was one of the big issues, when I was looking for a house, it had to be in the city so I could use transportation.

I think it would be a major life change for everyone that takes the bus.

NOTE: Although taxi service is available in Stevens Point, only two participants occasionally use taxis. Taxi fees, even for the disabled, are higher than transit service fees and the cost is solely the rider's.

Rider Assessment of Value and Customer Service

Riders receive a good value for what they pay. Accommodations are made to meet the needs of transit users.

All participants agreed that they receive a fair value for what they pay. When asked to consider what they pay in a typical month for either service and whether it's a good value, everyone agreed vigorously. Summarizing the opinion of the entire group, a participant said, "I think it's a great [value]."

Rider fees are reasonable.

And the prices are really reasonable and for the monthly passes. I can't complain about the prices. [Can I just ask what a monthly pass costs?] For the disabled, a monthly pass is \$20. Seniors pay \$20...A bus pass is good for the whole month and you can ride the city buses as much as you want.

For everyone else it's a dollar or 50 cents. The prices are not bad for what we pay for the city buses. And then for the university students, they just have to show their cards...

We are very, very lucky. We are very lucky to pay only what we are paying...

I've been happy with the prices for bus passes.

Para-transit bills its riders monthly based on the number of rides. No one considered the cost unreasonable.

Point Plus bills me each month. If I use it weekly, say every Tuesday and Thursday to go to work, and to come home from work, so I would get billed for those days.

[Say you had a day full of multiple activities on para-transit. Do you pay for each trip?] Yes – two dollars for each ride...It's two dollars every time you get on. If I'm going grocery shopping, it's two dollars going, it's two dollars coming back. If they took me to the doctor it's two bucks. If they pick me up to go to the dentist, it's two bucks each time. They will keep a tab for you and I get a bill once a month. So you don't have to walk around with a whole bunch of one dollar bills on you.

[What's a monthly bill for the use of PT?] Mine is about anywhere from 10 to 12 to 14 dollars. I'm one who pre-plans so I can figure that out.

I have a daughter that's four, before her it was about \$100 a month, but after her it's about \$20. [Because you're staying home more?] Yes.

Mine is 20 or 30 but I've had close to 100 [dollars] sometimes.

Between 12 and 20 [dollars].

Riding the bus can be more economical than driving.

I started taking the bus a year ago when my car broke down. It's so economical.

A year ago I bought a pickup truck. I drive it once in a while to the store. It would cost me more to go downtown and do my walking... if I drive my pickup down there, it costs me a lot more than the city bus... Like I said, I've got a pickup truck I could drive every day, but taking the bus costs me less than taking the truck.

Participants offered numerous examples of good customer service.

Throughout the discussion, participants provided evidence of the accommodating services provided by the transit system.

Transit service assists the disabled.

I also want say that they are terrific to the disabled. Because recently I broke my hip and I had to walk with a walker, and they were terrific. They lowered the ramp for me. And also if I had trouble stepping down they would lower the bus down for me and they were just terrific.

Buses will stop anywhere along their route and they will diverge from routes if scheduling permits.

One thing about Stevens Point that's unusual is the bus will stop anywhere it's safe to stop. They do have stops with the sign and you can stand there, but if they're on a city

road that's a major road and has lots of traffic and you say, 'I want to stop at the next corner,' they stop at the next corner, as long as it's not hazardous. And it's pretty much that way with the pick-ups. If you're standing at the bus stop they're going to stop and pick you up. If you're just standing on the corner, until they know you, they might go flying by. Eventually they go, 'There's little Joe,' and they pick me up. Here in Stevens Point they'll pretty much stop anywhere that's along the route and they have some areas that are optional where – I know near Sentry Insurance they normally don't go there – but if you call them ahead of time, 'I need to be picked up there,' they will come and get you...It's not like anywhere in town. One block off their route and they can stay on schedule. There's a senior living place called Oak Ridge on the east side of town where they normally go to, there's more than one entrance, and they normally go to one entrance, but they don't stop at the assisted living side, but if you request it, they'll do that.

Para-transit will notify riders if there is a scheduling problem.

[Would para-transit contact you if they had a scheduling problem and couldn't meet you?] [Agreement around the table.] I've had where they are running late and they call and tell you that they are running late. They do the best they can to try to keep things on schedule and if they can squeeze you in they will. It's gotten very busy. And that's a good thing because you don't want them to make no money. They're very courteous.

Services run regardless of inclement weather.

...Except for running late when there is bad weather. That we can live with because we understand that.

Up here 10 minutes late is nothing...I've been using the bus for the past 13 years, and I think there has been one time my bus has had to cancel because of weather.

No matter how the storm is outside, the bus is always there.

Other examples of accommodating customer service.

One time I did have a bus pass me up. I was at the bus stop and I was waiting and waiting and waiting and it was in the winter. He did pass me up. I called the bus

garage. 'The bus driver didn't see me and I have to get to work or I'll be docked.' And it so happens that the bus is every hour. They sent the bus back to pick me up. That could only happen in a small town.

Put it this way – I used to use maps a lot, now I just ask the bus driver. They are knowledgeable and they let you know where your stop is and how long it will take. It's super.

The buses are clean and drivers are courteous.

The transit web site states that bus routes “offer a safe, reliable, affordable option for traveling throughout the community. The city buses are clean, comfortable and climate controlled. All buses are wheelchair accessible and have easy to use bicycle racks mounted on the front.” Participants were asked if they thought that statement was factual.

They are clean. They are comfortable. It's not first class accommodations. As far as the regular route they are wheel chair accessible. But I think they can only carry two chairs. This isn't saying anything against them – it's just the way it is.

...the bus is like 1,000 times quicker than the cab and the cabs aren't cleaner. I know it's not their fault, after they were driving late nights, the cabs are dirty, not nice. They clean the buses a lot.

I think they do [live up to the statement on the web page]. And they're very courteous. They're not like crazy drivers, you feel safe. Usually, I feel safe.

For me it's positive...I agree with the statement. I've never had any problems with them. They've always been attentive and helpful.

I agree with everybody else. I've had no complaints about the city drivers. [And the system?] The system, everything has been great.

I agree with everyone else. I think the buses are wonderful...The bus drivers are wonderful. They joke with the customers. They tell us jokes. They are very friendly.

In this hot weather, it's really nice to walk into an air conditioned bus. It's great...I think I'll ride the bus all day and not use my A/C at home.

(In)Convenience of Using the Transit System: Adequacy of Routes and Location of Bus Stops

Expanding the bus service might alleviate some user reliance on the para-transit system.

Although grateful for the service, participants were quick to point out that the transit system does not offer complete coverage of their needs. Additional designated bus stops are needed and routes need to be expanded. The limited bus service places a greater reliance on the para-transit system; users must plan ahead to schedule a para-transit pick-up.

Opinion of bus stop locations depends upon rider needs. Some find the stop locations very convenient; others note that bus service is not available to their destinations.

I live at the Briggs Street high-rise building, behind Shopko, and that bus stops right in front of my door and picks me up. And that's what I love about it. In the winter time, I'm very leery because I have problems with my legs. So that stops right there and brings me right back to my door. I love it! I love it! Yes.

I have major issues with going to Aspirus. I came really close to getting hit during the winter time. Aspirus is off the city route. And it's a long walk for a person who can't walk to Aspirus and I've talked to other people who have strollers and kids and say, 'I wish the bus could drop-off by Aspirus.' I've had friends almost get hit by vehicles and there are no sidewalks out by Aspirus. [What is Aspirus?] Part of it is a clinic based out of Wausau. There's no drop off to Aspirus – that's my major concern.

I was going to say the same thing...There's no sidewalks and it's almost two long blocks you got to walk. Because I go to Aspirus pretty often and I don't see why the city bus can't stop there.

Because bus service is not available everywhere or stops are infrequent users must rely on para-transit.

I've taken the bus but not very often because where I live there is no bus stop I can go out to. It's not real far but it's not close enough for me to go out to. I need the door-to-door services. I usually take the [para-transit] bus to work, to college, I take it to doctors and

*dentist appointments, wherever I have to go. [Do you use the para-transit or the bus?]
The para-transit.*

I take the para-transit because there are people who can't walk more than two or three blocks. There's no way you can take a city bus – you have to have door-to-door. For me the city bus would be five blocks away and I can't do it.

The visually impaired rely on para-transit for door-to-door service.

Because I'm visually impaired, if the bus goes within a block of where I'm going but I don't know how to get there, it still doesn't help me. A block away might as well be another city. If I don't know, 'Walk one block and turn right...' As I've gotten older...I have to walk to the bus stop, it's supposed to be there a quarter to the hour, sometimes it's early or late, I have to get there earlier, so I might be standing there 20 minutes, as I've gotten older, standing in the heat or cold or whatever for a period of time isn't as enjoyable as it used to be so I'm using para-transit more.

For me, I can be a block away and it's still too far away if I don't know where it is. If I know where it is, I could be four blocks away and I wouldn't care.

Para-transit service can be difficult to schedule and therefore, requires advance planning.

The para-transit has gotten busy over the past few years and now it's quite hard to call. It used to be that I could call a day or two in advance and say, 'I need a ride at such and such a time.' I'd either get the exact time I wanted or 15 minutes earlier, but that's no longer the case...in a pinch you could call and say, 'Something just came up can you pick me up in the next couple of hours?' And there's a good chance they could.

[It sounds like para-transit has gotten busier in recent years.] A lot of times I have to call a week ahead, you know your schedule, so you book it into your schedule. [So you're thoughtful and you have to plan ahead.] Yeah, organized.

Even if you call a few days ahead, sometimes you can't get it. I don't have the luxury of walking to the bus stop. So I've had to call a cab and that gets expensive. If you have a regular schedule they will put it on the plan for the whole month. Once you know what your schedule is, get it booked out. And for medical, dental, doctors...if you know that a

month before...grocery shopping is last minute, two or three days and I take what's available.

To take full advantage of the transit system, riders must be informed and have an understanding of the nuances of public transportation in Stevens Point.

One thing the bus service does have, the bus can't go into Plover, other than Crossroads Commons, but they do have some deal with the cab service in Plover so there's, I've never done this, but the bus will take you to a certain stop and the cab will pick you up and take you, so if you have a doctor. in Plover, uh...

In response to the above comment: Yeah, [the bus] goes to Johnny's turnpike and that's where they make the turnaround.

If I have something short term and it's along the bus route, I'll just take the regular bus. The way the bus route works here is I get the bus at my house, go up-town and transfer to another bus so something that might be a 10 minute car ride is a half hour or 45 minute bus ride. That's fine. I get there.

For those in wheel chairs, the public bus is not as convenient as para-transit.

[You're in a chair. Have you tried the bus?] I have. I've ridden it with a friend of mine. We waited at the bus stop. I got on. It's a little more difficult and a longer ride. You don't go from point A to point B on the regular bus the way you do with the para-transit. It was a nice ride but I'd rather go and get it done with and come home instead of the long ride and having to switch buses to get to where we were going.

Additional Aspects of the Transit System that Could be Improved

The transit system is not perfect; it could stand some improvement.

Throughout the discussion, participants identified various aspects of the transit system which could be improved. Most notable are occasional rider problems, road conditions, insufficient scheduling and limited routes. However, even after recognizing transit system deficiencies, these riders are appreciative of what service is available. In the words of one participant, "But, still, we're glad they're here."

Occasional rider problems.

On the transit system, you don't have a choice who you sit next to. You might have issues with another passenger. Sometimes the bus drivers don't step in because they are too busy driving. It would behoove us to have a bus helper on the city bus. A couple of times I have been harassed by fellow passengers. I didn't say anything to the driver but I did call the garage and talk to the manager. The passengers did change after that, they stopped the harassment... The city drivers should step in a little bit if we have complaints, on our behalf, if we have complaints about any of the passengers or anything.

Comfort depends on road conditions.

The only problem on there is when you say comfortable. The buses can only be as comfortable as the roads they drive on. [Laughter.] You get on Bush Street...Why can't they take whoever is in charge of fixing roads, ride them on buses, 'Oh, this should be fixed!'... [What if you drove your pickup truck through there?] Same thing. It would be going bomp, bomp. It's not the drivers or the bus, it's the road. You got potholes and everything else and they never get fixed. Hey, this is a bus route, why can't they fix them. You have to ride on the bus one time and see how bad they are.

I do agree with you on that one. They are traveled constantly by the bus, every half hour. All day long.

Longer hours and scheduling.

As far as evenings, it would be nice if you could have bus service 24 hours a day...Transportation for the disabled is a huge problem. We would like buses 24 hours a day, and emergencies, we sure do appreciate what Point Transit does, when they are available.

Longer hours for the bus system, maybe on Saturdays. Like going to Wal-Mart on Saturdays.

Another thing about city buses, it does not run in evenings. Sometimes you have to go to the clinic, it's an emergency, and you have no transportation to get there, and if you're on Medicare and Medicaid, you have to call [] and they don't take emergency calls so you have to find a ride for yourself to get to the hospital, otherwise take the ambulance which is quite expensive.

The buses stop at six o'clock...[If it's eight in the evening, and an emergency came up and you had to get somewhere...] We're on our own. It all depends. We would have to find our own route...Basically, you're going to have to figure out who is going to get you there. If emergency can't take you, then find somebody to take you.

There's another thing about the buses, some of them arrive every half hour and others arrive once an hour, so they are not available when you really need to go.

This participant noted that more frequent evening service is available when the university is in session.

When the university is in session there's [transit] that runs Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights and anybody can ride it. It's like a safe ride home. With drunks.

Additional buses and expanded routes.

I mentioned how busy para-transit is, I don't know if they've gotten busy enough to consider running a third bus. It's all more money. They have gotten booked-up and it's a concern for us, not always having a week in advance knowledge of where we need to go.

...more buses going, letting the person off closer to their doctor's appointments or to Aspirus. Otherwise, I think it's great.

I think adding another route...A route into Plover.

It won't take you to funerals or weddings downtown. It's hard to get to Rapids or Plover or wherever.

Additional bus shelters.

We need a bus shelter across from Edgewater Manor. The corner that I take the bus to work in the morning, is the coldest, windiest in town and there is no bus shelter and the bus stops right in front, but on the way back it goes around and makes a loop and you have to walk across a busy intersection and they have up flashing yellow light for us but we need more bus shelters around town. Very definitely.

How the Transit System is Funded and Willingness to Pay (More)

How the Stevens Point transit system is funded is poorly understood. Participants were, however, generally amenable to paying more to maintain the services they currently receive.

Numerous ideas were offered by the participants in response to being asked how they thought the general bus and the para-transit services are funded. Only one participant demonstrated a notable level of knowledge.

I think taxpayers. I could be wrong. And businesses – they pay to have the buses go out to Wal-Mart and places like that.

...part of the taxes we pay yearly go to the bus.

The grants, that's what I heard too, it comes from the state, most of it.

Plus the money we pay for the bus fare – the fare box.

And the university pays for students...I know the tuition pays for the city bus as well.

This participant who worked on a local transportation committee offered an informed opinion.

Most of the money comes from grants written to the state. It was talked about in a meeting. Stevens Point provides seven percent or 12 percent of the cost of the bus here. We really don't front much of the cost.

When asked to consider the source providing the greatest revenue, again, there was variance in rider knowledge.

I think the state.

I think most comes from the state.

I think a lot of it comes from city taxes.

Grants are something like 80 percent.

Well...I think it's mostly federal.

I'd probably say all of the above.

I think equal.

I have no clue.

Non-transit users benefit from the transit system.

It was explained to the group that state contributions to the transit system originate from the gasoline tax – that vehicle drivers contribute approximately 14 percent of the total funding. In response to being asked what the group would say to drivers that might oppose this level of funding, they offered:

...I drove 35 years until this happened. You don't know what's going to happen to you someday, either. [This participant was a driver and paid her gas tax share until she was disabled by a head injury.]

Their mobility is good for the economy.

If it weren't for buses we wouldn't be there. If it weren't for us, they [retail] wouldn't be there. A Kohl's or a Wal-Mart wouldn't be there if it weren't for the consumers. We're spending our money too, and we're helping them.

Let's put it this way, when we go out and shop for food, we pay the same price as the middle class and the rich for food. So there is not fair there, either. We need jobs here.

The fare box isn't fair.

One participant (the knowledgeable rider previously identified) informed the group that rider contributions via the fare box generate the smallest percentage of funding. Moderators took this opportunity to inform the group that collections from the fare box generate approximately six percent of the revenue, federal funds comprise about 47

percent, state funds comprise about 14 percent and local taxes make-up the remaining one-third of transit funding. The group was then asked if this seemed like a fair balance and who they thought should be financially supporting the system. Participants had little to say about funding equity, perhaps because it's an issue they rarely, if ever, consider.

I would say the employers because where I work, they do pay part of my bus fare and I think more employers should do this for their employees, they should get involved with the transportation too.

I think everyone who uses the city buses or the para-transit, we should be the ones to pay because we're the ones who are using it. [So the fare box isn't fair and should be higher?] Yes. I do.

I've been taking transit for 25 years and as far as I know there has not been an increase. I definitely think there should be...

Participants are willing to pay more in order to maintain transit services.

Participants would prefer to pay higher user fees than have any services cut.

There is a point...when it comes to the point of having a system or not, the fares should go up before they ax you.

[You would rather see the fees go up than services cut?] [Assents at table.] I'm in trouble otherwise.

Participants were generally amenable to paying more to maintain the services they currently receive.

I pay 50 cents one-way. If I had to pay a dollar one-way that's not going to make or break me, that extra 50 cents. I think it's worth it.

I would pay more, it's worth it, and I'm on a fixed income. I would have enough, and I would pay more – I pay 50 cents one way and 50 cents back, so a dollar for one ride. I would pay a dollar each way. I would pay the increase.

[You pay \$20 monthly.] I don't know – a five dollar increase – still cheaper than driving a truck every day.

If the fare went up to 75 cents from 50 cents.

Maybe five dollars a month or more. As long as it got me from point A to point B.

I would pay another two dollars for Point Plus (para-transit) – from \$2 to \$4.

I would say a 50 percent increase so 50 cents plus 25 cents to 75 cents. I'd be willing to pay more but to me that sounds like a reasonable deal to me.

NOTE: Another participant was inaudible due to a speech impairment but agreed to a 10 or 20 percent increase on her monthly bill.

If para-transit fares increased too much, these participants would likely have to curtail their frequency of use. When asked, "Is there a point where a monthly fee would cause you to reduce your use?" responses included:

I'd say yes, definitely. I know if it got too high, then I'd have to just once a week, do all my shopping, or doctors appointments, I'd still have to go them, but I'd really have to cut down, I think.

Well, it depends. If it's, 'Let's go to Target because I feel like getting out of the house.' That would be something I could let go. If [daughter] had to go to extra-curricular activities for school, that is part of her life, doctors' appointments, that is just necessity stuff. I would cut back on the frivolous stuff but not on the character building stuff.

I could see that it would make sense to increase, but I don't know exactly the amount. Some of us need the service. We might not go as many places but we would still go. I'm still going to go to work. I'm still going to go to the doctor. But that might be all I'd do.

This participant offered an insightful observation: a willingness to pay more is not the same as an ability to pay.

...most people who take the bus in Stevens Point are the elderly and disabled and don't work. We're on limited fixed incomes and I can afford to pay more, I think we should be paying more, but if you don't have the money, you don't have the money. It's a hard question.

Establishing a Regional Transit Authority

Participants were leery of a regional transit authority. They feared that tax-paying voters might eliminate the current service.

A regional transit authority (RTA) was described to the group as a public body with the authority to provide public transportation services at the local level. Once created, an RTA could authorize a sales and use tax to support the transportation system, typically enacted by referendum.

The concept “scared” some participants. They speculated that non-transit users would object to supporting a service via an increase in local taxation. In their opinion, the current funding base of multiple sources provides greater stability for continued service.

That scares me...We might end up without a system here....They might vote it in or vote it out.

It's scary because I've heard so much about the taxes in this town. They keep going up. Everybody is complaining about it. People are tapped out for money. You keep getting asked for donations all the time. Constantly.

There is some negativity [in the public] towards bus service in this town.

People don't like to spend money on things they don't use. We have a vote, 'do you think we should put more money to transit?' Well, 'i don't use transit, I don't want to spend more money on transit.' They don't think about all the people who can't get anywhere and now we have to put them into homes.

[Which offers the most security for continuation of transit – current funding or an RTA?] The current way. [Unanimous group agreement.]

One participant, however, voiced interest in learning more about an RTA.

[Anyone feel differently?] I'm curious about the RTA idea. What do they have to offer?

Closing Thoughts

The transit system in Stevens Point is a necessity for these participants; without it, some question their ability to remain in Stevens Point.

To conclude the discussion, participants were given the opportunity to express a final thought about the transit system in Stevens Point – the most important message to be taken back to Madison and shared with the Department of Transportation. Most comments underscored the importance of the system to their daily lives; without the transit system their independence might vanish.

I would say if there were no transit system in this town, can you help me move? I would have to move.

Don't ever stop the bus system. I think it's great.

The bus system is not a luxury, it's a necessity.

The bus system, we're grateful to have it. If we didn't have it, we wouldn't know what to do.

It's become like a lifeline to me. If I didn't have it I wouldn't be out on my own. It's become a major lifeline. I really enjoy it.