



# Regional *Report*

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## CREDITS

### Research Funders

Greater Milwaukee Foundation  
Helen Bader Foundation  
Richard and Ethel Herzfeld  
Foundation

### Study authors

Ryan Horton  
*Researcher*

Robert Madison  
*Research Intern*

---

Jeffrey C. Browne  
*President*

Anneliese Dickman, J.D.  
*Research Director*

Jeffrey Schmidt  
*Researcher*

Jerry Slaske  
*Communications Director*

Catherine A. Crother  
*Office Manager*



633 West Wisconsin Avenue  
Suite 406  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53203  
[www.publicpolicyforum.org](http://www.publicpolicyforum.org)  
Phone (414) 276-8240

## *Public opinion and transportation priorities in southeastern Wisconsin*

A solid transportation infrastructure is critical to the economic competitiveness of a regional economy. Highway and rail projects result in the more efficient movement of people and goods and can lead the way to millions of dollars in new private investment. But major transportation improvements don't come cheaply.

In the seven-county Milwaukee region, the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission is exploring the merits of a \$20.3 billion, 30-year regional transportation plan to maintain, add capacity, and operate our highway and transit systems. The plan predicts an annual financial shortfall of \$65 million. With federal and state governments already funding a majority of improvements, it's likely that local government will be asked to raise additional funds to plug the projected fiscal hole.

In light of the big decisions ahead, the Public Policy Forum conducted a survey in 2005 of 600 residents from the region about transportation.

### Key findings:

- **Highways:** Though adding highway capacity was still popular with a majority of residents (59%), every transit option presented in the survey had higher levels of support in the region (61% - 81%).
- **Transit:** Support for transit was strong in Milwaukee County and its surrounding counties. In fact, four out of five transit options surpassed 70% approval rates in Milwaukee's suburban counties. In contrast, adding highway capacity only scored above 60% in one area, the WOW (Waukesha, Ozaukee and Washington) counties.
- **Gas tax:** Adding a penny to the current gas tax for the purpose of funding transportation improvements had a majority of support in the region (60%). Using a portion of the existing gas tax to improve transit in southeastern Wisconsin received support from 69%.
- **Trends in public opinion:** From 1996 to 2005, public opinion has changed little on what taxes and fees should be imposed to support transportation improvements, despite a growing perception that the re-

gion is a “tax hell.” That said, support for using the gas tax as a source of funds has eroded slightly, while more support exists today for higher fees (auto registration and driver’s license).

- **Sales tax:** A 1% sales tax increase received support among 51% of those surveyed in Milwaukee County and 50% of those in the region’s southern counties (Racine, Kenosha and Walworth). Region-wide, a 1% sales tax increase was favored by 46%.
- **RTA:** A large majority (75%) favored the creation of a regional transportation authority, but just 43% of those favoring the idea also favored granting it taxing powers.
- **Zoo Interchange reconstruction:** When considering its transportation needs, the region placed a higher priority on the east-west freeway corridor (55%) over that of the north-south freeway corridor (33%). Those in Milwaukee County, despite playing host to both corridors, also favored the east-west (61%) over the north-south (30%) by a large margin.

Support for public transportation in this survey was consistent with a national trend. A recent Harris Interactive poll said that 44% of Americans would like to see commuter trains get a larger share of passenger transportation. By contrast, only 11% of the respondents felt that local travel by car should get an increasing share of passenger travel.

**Billions to be spent on transportation during the next 10 years**

Many large transportation projects are currently under construction or study in southeastern Wisconsin. As the region makes plans for the future, we must decide how to prioritize projects in light of limited financial resources. **Table 1** outlines several projects fighting for funding and public support.

The Kenosha-Racine-Milwaukee (KRM) project is a proposal to operate commuter rail service from Kenosha through Racine and into downtown Milwaukee, via various stops. The service would connect to existing Metra commuter trains operating between Chicago and Kenosha. Currently, an alternatives analysis is being considered, as well as a draft environmental impact statement, comparing options for serving the corridor, such as commuter trains, express buses, or leaving the current system as is.

The Milwaukee Connector would be a system of guided buses or similar technology vehicles, running limited-stop service between downtown Milwaukee and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Miller Park, the

**Table 1: Examples of proposed transportation projects between 2006 and 2016**

Project	Status	Capital cost	Completion date
Marquette Interchange	Under construction	\$810 million	November 2008
KRM	Environmental impact statement and alternatives analysis will be completed in summer 2007. Not yet in preliminary engineering.	\$152 million	2011
Milwaukee Connector	Public review and public hearings are ongoing. Not yet in preliminary engineering.	\$300 million	2011
North-south freeway reconstruction	Preliminary engineering and the environmental impact statement will be completed in 2009	\$1 billion	2016
Zoo Interchange/I-94/US45 reconstruction	\$3 million initial planning grant approved in the 2005-07 state budget	\$1 billion	To follow north-south construction
Milwaukee-Madison high-speed rail	Seeking funding commitments	\$316 million	2012
Milwaukee-Chicago high-speed rail	Seeking funding commitments	\$227 million	2014

*\*All dollar amounts and completion dates above are approximate. Data were obtained from various sources such as newspaper articles and online publications.*

Third Ward, and the near northwest side. It is currently at the “locally preferred alternative” (LPA) stage in which the recommended routes and vehicles are presented. The steering committee comprised of the city of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, the Milwaukee Metropolitan Association of Commerce (MMAC), and the Wisconsin Center District– WCD must approve the plan before it advances to preliminary engineering. The MMAC and WCD have already endorsed the plan, while both the city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County have rejected the concept.

The north-south freeway project involves reconstruction of I-94 from the Wisconsin-Illinois state line to the Mitchell Interchange in southern Milwaukee. At this time, the corridor is undergoing preliminary engineering and an environmental impact study to determine a course of action when construction begins in 2009.

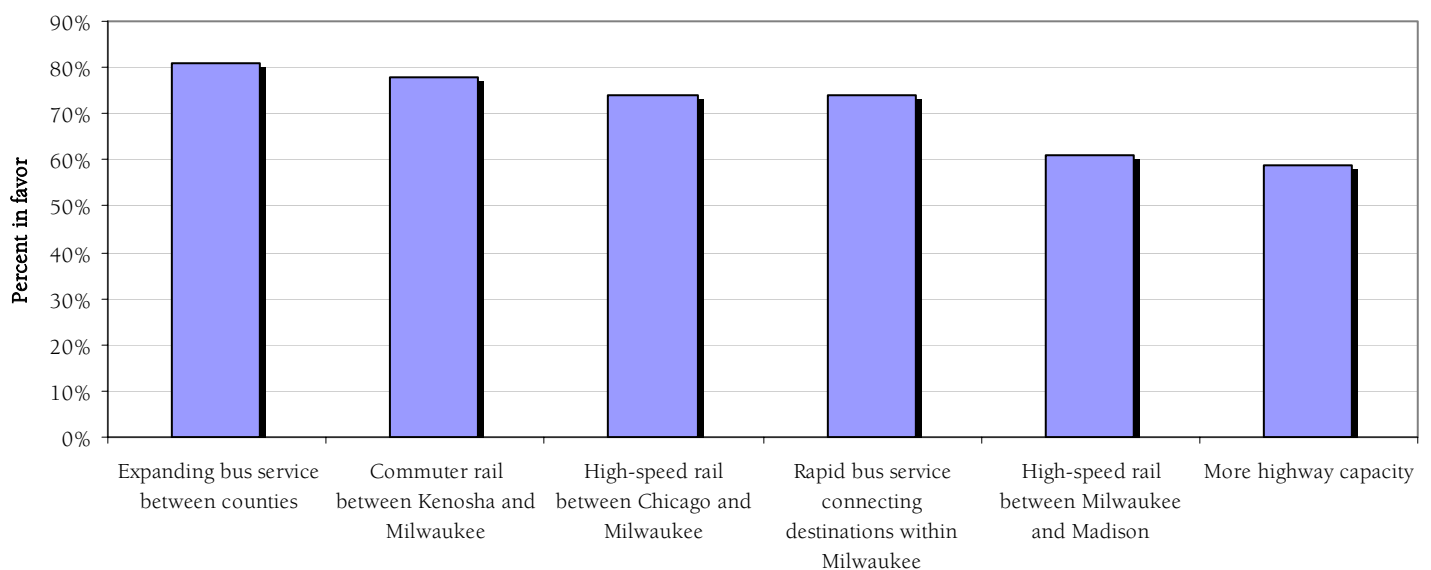
The Zoo Interchange project, which could include the reconstruction of US45 from I-94 north to Washington County and the reconstruction of I-94 west to the Waukesha County line, has received \$3 million in state funds for project planning. The project is slated to start after the completion of the north-south freeway.

The Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI) is a \$7.7 billion, 10-year plan to operate high-speed trains throughout the Midwest, with a hub in Chicago. The network would include high-speed trains running between Chicago and Milwaukee and between Milwaukee and Madison. It is currently awaiting federal funding for full-scale implementation. Some track in Michigan and Illinois have been upgraded, enabling passenger trains to operate at speeds up to 95 mph between Chicago and Detroit (as noted by the Federal Railroad Administration) and trains soon will be able to operate at up to 110 mph between Chicago and St. Louis. Speed improvements have not been made to track in southeastern Wisconsin.

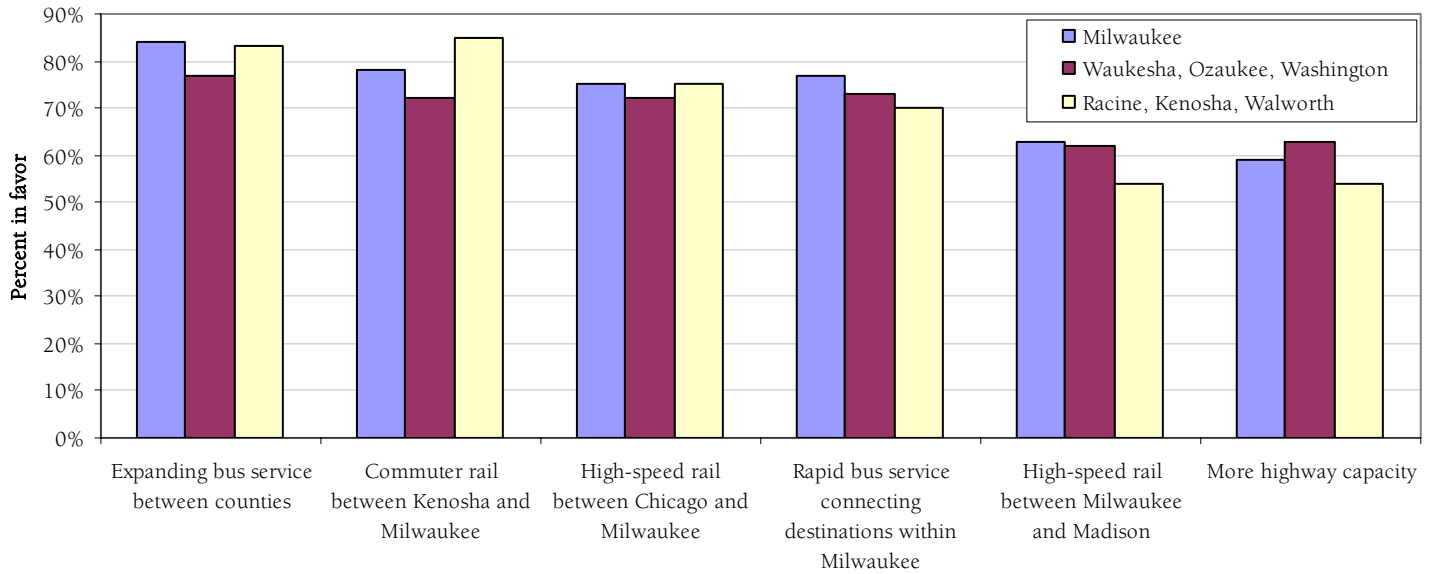
A July 2005 survey by the Public Policy Forum showed that southeastern Wisconsin residents are inclined to favor investment in public transportation over additional highway capacity. “More highway capacity” received the least support (**Chart 1**). The top transportation priority of the region’s residents (supported by 81%) was expansion of bus service between counties. Improved rail service, including commuter rail between Milwaukee and Kenosha and high-speed rail to Chicago, and rapid bus service within Milwaukee were supported by over 70% in the region.

Support for transit improvements over highways was consistent throughout the region (**Chart 2- see next page**). Comparing responses from Milwaukee County with those in Waukesha, Ozaukee, Washington, Racine, Kenosha, and Walworth counties showed that suburban county residents also favored transit over highway expansion.

**Chart 1: Support levels for various transportation options**



**Chart 2: Transportation preferences by county**

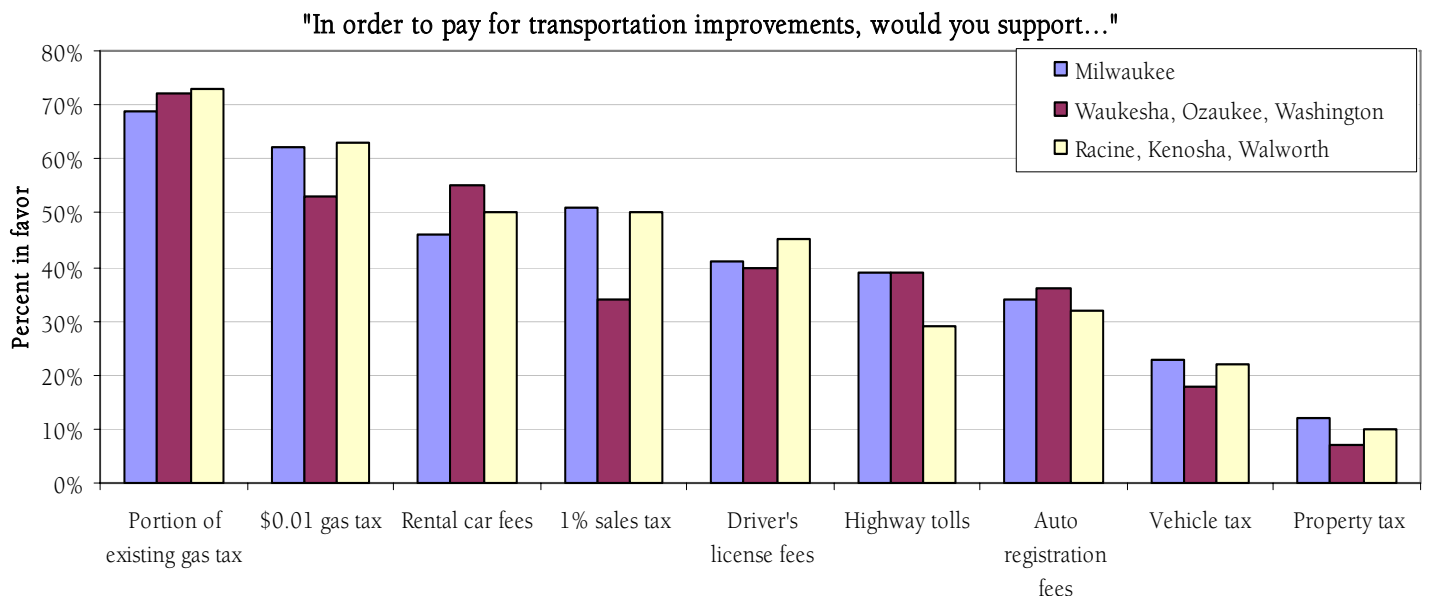


**How should we pay for transportation improvements?**

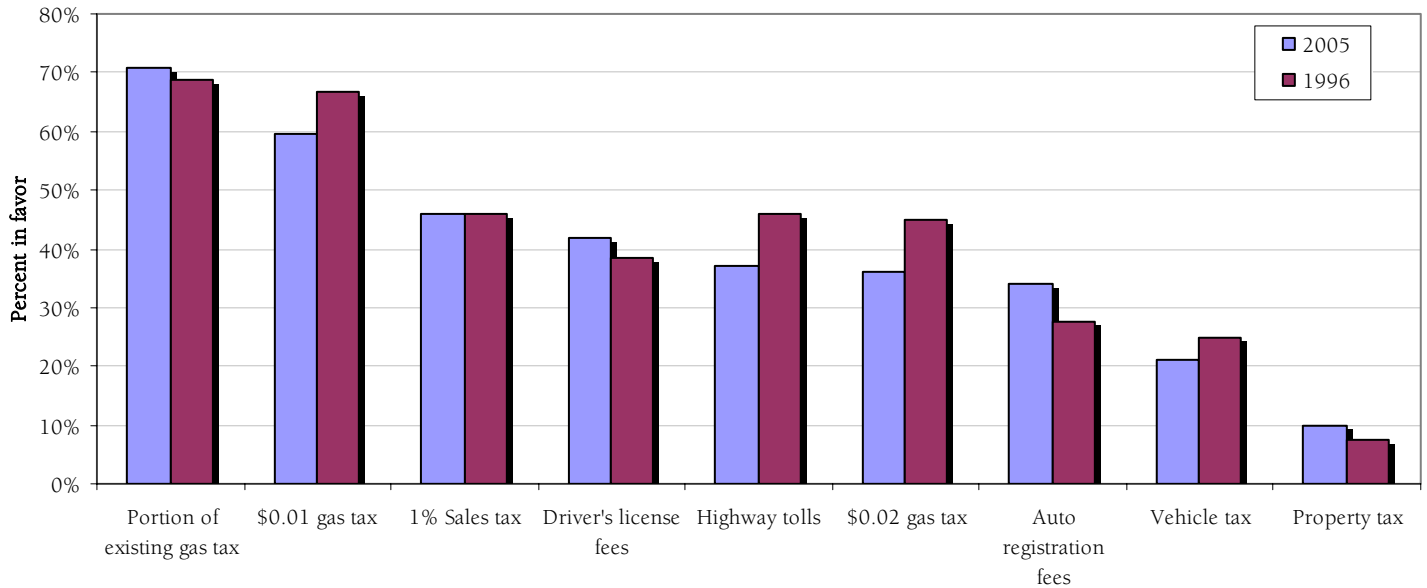
The easy part is asking for more transportation options. The hard part is figuring out how to pay for them. While raising taxes is never popular, the public did show a preference for using a portion of the existing gas tax to improve public transportation (69%) or paying an additional one cent in gas tax (60%) for general transportation needs. Other funding options presented to respondents included rental car fees (supported by 50% of respondents), a 1% sales tax (46%), additional driver’s license fees (42%), highway tolls (37%), auto registration fees (34%), vehicle tax (21%), and property taxes (10%).

Support for a penny increase in the gas tax had majority support throughout the region: 53% of those in Waukesha, Ozaukee, or Washington counties; 63% in Racine, Kenosha, or Walworth counties; and 62% in Milwaukee County. Support for different taxes varied among counties, as shown in **Chart 3**.

**Chart 3: How to pay for transportation improvements**



**Chart 4: Comparison of 2005 and 1996 survey results**



A July 1996 survey - also by the Forum - asked many of the same questions about transportation funding options. It used a random sample of 800 adults living in Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, Washington and Waukesha counties. The survey had a margin of error of 3.5%. **Chart 4** compares the two surveys.

Support levels for funding options stayed remarkably consistent from 1996 to 2005 with only two options showing large changes over the 10-year period. The two options were “highway tolls,” with support falling from 46% in 1996 to 37% in 2005 and “\$0.02 gas tax,” with support dropping from 45% in 1996 to 36.0% in 2005. These results indicate a downward shift in gas tax support, possibly due to a dramatic increase in gas prices during the survey period (July and August 2005).

### Support for regionalism

There was widespread support for the creation of a regional transportation authority (RTA), with 75% of those surveyed supporting it. This included 77% of the residents of Racine, Kenosha, and Walworth counties, 75% of the residents of Milwaukee County, and 74% of those in Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington counties. When asked whether the RTA should be permitted to tax, however, just 43% of those favoring an RTA also favored taxing authority. The 1996 survey found that 49% favored an RTA with taxing authority.

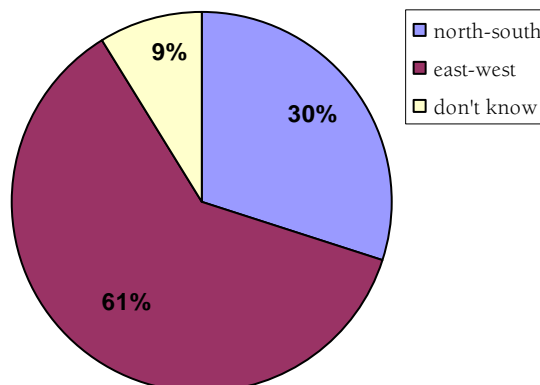
Support for regional cooperation appeared to influence support for an RTA. Of those that supported increased regional cooperation, 79% favored an RTA. Only 43% of those that thought regional cooperation was a bad idea supported an RTA. There also was correlation between support for an RTA or other regional authorities (for arts and recreation and a watershed district). In addition, when asked if transportation decisions should be made individually (by municipality) or as a region, 82% favored the latter which was consistent with the survey’s finding that governments should cooperate more.

### Priority placed on east-west freeway reconstruction

Region-wide, the public placed a higher priority on the east-west freeway corridor (55%) over that of the north-south freeway corridor (33%). What’s surprising perhaps is that those in Milwaukee County also favored the east-west (61%) over the north-south (30%) by a large margin (**Chart 5 - see next page**). Milwaukee County residents may have been predicted to be more balanced in their opinion over what freeway span should be a higher priority.

**Chart 5: Public opinion in Milwaukee County on freeway reconstruction priorities**

When it comes to transportation needs, which should be a higher priority: The north-south freeway between Milwaukee and Kenosha OR the east-west freeway between Milwaukee and Waukesha?



**Methodology and limitations**

For this project, the Forum conducted a survey of 600 adults in southeastern Wisconsin (Kenosha, Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, Walworth, Washington and Waukesha counties). Survey demographics are in **Table 2**. Participants were selected at random and interviewed by telephone in July and August 2005. For a survey of this size, the sampling margin of error was four percentage points (higher for subgroups).

It should be noted that this survey was conducted during a dramatic rise in gas prices, but prior to the statewide debate over the repeal of the automatic gas tax increase. It is not known how these events may have influenced public opinion. Regardless, as seen in **Chart 4**, public opinion has remained consistent on these issues over the past 10 years.

The complete list of questions asked and the responses for the 2005 survey can be found at [www.publicpolicyforum.org/pdfs/RegionalVisionAppendix.pdf](http://www.publicpolicyforum.org/pdfs/RegionalVisionAppendix.pdf).

**Table 2: Survey demographics**

Survey Participants	600		
Kenosha	7%	No College	30%
Milwaukee	47%	Some College	32%
Ozaukee	3%	College Graduate	21%
Racine	10%	Graduate Degree	14%
Walworth	5%		
Washington	9%	Age 18-29	12%
Waukesha	18%	30s	18%
		40s	22%
Male	45%	50s	24%
Female	55%	60s	11%
		70 or older	13%
Homeowner	75%		
Renter	25%	<\$25,000 hh income	15%
		\$25,000-\$35,000	12%
Liberal	19%	\$35,00-\$45,000	12%
Moderate	37%	\$45,000-\$55,000	12%
Conservative	41%	\$55,000-\$65,000	9%
		\$65,000-\$75,000	9%
Republican	32%	\$75,000-\$85,000	6%
Democrat	30%	\$85,000-\$100,000	6%
Independent	32%	More than \$100,000	9%