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# Milwaukee-area transit at important crossroads

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MobilISE

Dave Steele

Transit in our region is at a crossroads.

The Wisconsin Policy Forum recently released its latest research into the fiscal cliff and potential service cuts facing Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS). The research projects that 4,500 riders could face service cuts, primarily along routes that serve suburban areas in Milwaukee County.

This should concern everyone, whether we use the bus or not. The entire southeastern Wisconsin region benefits from a strong transit system in Milwaukee County – not only in reducing car traffic on the streets and encouraging cleaner air, but in connecting workforce to job opportunities. This is of significant concern as we experience the lowest sustained unemployment rate in our region in a generation.

Transportation is one of the most persistent barriers to employment. As the cost of car ownership has increased, the numbers of households owning cars has declined. In some parts of the city of Milwaukee, fully one third of households don't have access to cars. (This is significant) in a region where the majority of jobs are now located in the suburbs and hard to access from the city.

The potential cuts to MCTS, unless funding solutions are found, would be a blow to not only job seekers, but to businesses in the region. Thousands of businesses are served by routes that could be cut, exacerbating an already significant labor shortage for businesses in the region.

And while on-demand rideshare services like FlexRide Milwaukee can help fill gaps in the transit network, they're not intended nor designed to replace large areas of transit service.

While MobilISE and our partners have recently expanded FlexRide under a State Workforce Innovation Grant and Milwaukee County ARPA dollars, growing our footprint to serve potentially several thousand new riders over the next two years, the service wouldn't come close to serving the large numbers of riders currently served by the MCTS routes at risk of elimination.

The debates over government revenue can often seem abstract. But there's nothing abstract about providing access to family supporting jobs. Transit is essential to economic mobility for individuals and for the economic health of the region as a whole.

In changing state law to allow for an expanded Milwaukee County sales tax, lawmakers in Madison have an opportunity to help grow local economies. Reducing the barriers that prevent local governments from funding essential services, would in turn drive economic development. In Milwaukee County, one of those essential services is transit.

*Dave Steele is executive director of MobilISE.*

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