

<http://www.ozaukeeexpress.com/images/050213/markSM.png> **Mark Gottlieb has parlayed his interest and expertise in transportation into a state cabinet position that keeps this Port-to-Madison commuter close to his work**

Most little boys play with cars and trucks, but outgrow that tendency as they grow up. Mark Gottlieb parlayed that early interest into a career.

Gottlieb is secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, a department that deals with everything from bicycling to driving and flying and boating.

His department oversees the roughly 700 miles of railroad tracks the state owns, as well as the Wisconsin State Patrol.

He's in charge of a department with 3,400 employees and a \$3.25 billion annual budget and is responsible for the 11,800-mile state highway system.

"Just about everyone in the state is our customer," said Gottlieb, a longtime Port Washington resident. "We're the people who get people to and from the market, tourists to and from their destinations. And everything in our economy depends on moving something from one place to another."



"We touch everyone every day, because virtually everyone uses some mode of transportation each day."

The 56-year-old Gottlieb was picked for the job when Gov. Scott Walker took office two years ago.

"I let it be known it was an appointment I would like to have," said Gottlieb, who had just been re-elected to his fifth term the Wisconsin Assembly at the time.

He likened the selection process for the cabinet-level position to that used by businesses hiring executives, adding he didn't need to do a lot of soul searching before accepting the job.

"It was never my intention to make a long-term career out of the Legislature," Gottlieb said, noting the average tenure for an assemblyman is probably less than 10 years. "I enjoyed the time I spent there, but it was time to move on."

Gottlieb, who had served in the Assembly since 2002, resigned his seat just hours after taking office in 2011 and was immediately sworn in as secretary of the DOT.

King of the roads

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It was a position that seems tailor-made for Gottlieb, who has a bachelor's degree in civil engineering with an emphasis in municipal transportation and a master's degree in transportation engineering.

A Navy veteran, he worked in private industry and municipal government, serving as the Village of Grafton public works director from 1992 until 2003, and was also active in municipal government. Gottlieb was a City of Port Washington alderman from 1991 to 1997 and mayor for six years after that before being elected to the Legislature in 2003.

While in the Assembly, Gottlieb served on the Transportation Projects Commission and co-chaired the Joint Legislative Commission on Transportation Needs and Finances. He also served in a number of leadership positions, including speaker pro tem for the 2007-08 session and assistant Republican leader of the Assembly for the 2009-10 session.

"The Legislature is a place where you can delve into areas you have an interest in," Gottlieb said. "I always was kind of a policy guy."

Working at the cabinet level is "certainly a lot different" than his previous job, Gottlieb said.

"It's a steep learning curve," he said. "There's a lot to get up to speed with quickly."

He's fortunate, he said, that the rest of the senior leadership in the department has been there a long time, including his deputy director, who's been there more than 30 years.

Today, Gottlieb spends the week in Madison — he's rented a small apartment there — with side trips to offices throughout the state and travels back to Port Washington for weekends with his wife Linda.

"I don't know that there is a typical day on this job," he said. "I enjoy what I do. It's not a 9-to-5 thing. That's part of the challenge."

"There are a lot of meetings, a fair amount of public-type events. I'm on the road a lot. The agency is all over the state, and I try to meet with the employees at the regional offices twice a year."

While he doesn't know how many miles he's traveled as the secretary, Gottlieb said his time on the road can be summed up simply — "I know I've been north of Highway 29 more times in the last two years than in my whole life prior."

He, his deputy secretary and executive assistant form the core of the DOT leadership, Gottlieb said. His deputy functions as the chief operating officer, and his executive assistant handles external relations, serving as a legislative liaison.

"My job is to design policy and strategic direction," Gottlieb said, as well as dealing with

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others outside the agency. "We work together very closely."

Although large projects, such as the Zoo interchange and Hoan bridge, tend to get all the attention, Gottlieb said they're a small part of his department's work.

"The real bread-and-butter of what we do is preserve our system. Maintenance is where we spend most of our money," he said. "We don't build that many new highways."

Gottlieb, who has always been known for his attention to detail, said he doesn't get too involved in specific projects. He leaves that up to his staff.

"I tend to be an engaged, hands-on person. I ask a lot of questions," he said. "But you just can't know everything that's going on. You have to have a high degree of confidence in your staff."

"There's no one who knows a job better than the person who does it every day. My role is to support them and do my best to get them the resources they need to do their job."

He spends a lot of time talking to legislators, but his office isn't in the Capitol. Instead, it's about four miles to the west.

In part because of that, Gottlieb said he doesn't have a lot of day-to-day interaction with Walker, but noted that the cabinet meets about every two weeks.

Although he never served in the Legislature with Walker, Gottlieb said he's happy to be working with him.

"The governor's been great to work for," he said. "He's very supportive of what we do. He understands the importance of transportation."

Walker, he noted, identified five themes in his budget in January, among them an investment in infrastructure, something that's key to the DOT.

Gottlieb serves at the behest of the governor. With Walker being touted in some circles as a potential presidential candidate in 2016, it's natural to ask if he's got his eye on a federal post.

"Not really," he said. "I haven't really thought about it. That's a long way off, and I'm concentrating my efforts on doing the best job for the governor and the residents of the state today."

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Image Information: LONGTIME PORT WASHINGTON resident Mark Gottlieb stood on the city's western border, next to the reconstructed Highway 33 — a project completed by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation after he took over as secretary of the DOT in 2011.

Photo by Sam Arendt