

Towns need help with roads—but not private snow plowing

Written by Ozaukee Press

Wednesday, 14 November 2012 16:59

Town governments are right to push for more road aid, but the Town of Port's idea of dropping county plowing looks like a mistake

Saukville Town Chairman Barbara Jobs didn't mean it as a threat to be taken literally last year when she said the Town of Saukville might have to tear up its paved roads and convert them to gravel in order to get by on reduced state and county road aid.

"I've heard where some communities are just grinding up their roads and converting them to gravel," she said. "We may have to consider something like that."

Jobs was alluding to what turned out to be an urban myth (actually a rural myth in this case) about road-funding frustration in Wisconsin towns. Gravel roads aren't really coming back, but both the myth and the town chairman's comment pointed to a real problem: Towns are having a hard time paying for maintaining the roads they provide for their residents and the general public.

It's bad enough that county road aid to the towns was ended last year in Ozaukee County. But Ozaukee towns, like towns everywhere in Wisconsin, also get a bad deal from the state of Wisconsin. Only 30% of the state transportation fund, which disburses money collected in gasoline taxes and vehicle registration fees, is spent on local roads, in spite of the fact that they are estimated to carry at least 40% of traffic in the state.

The Saukville Town Board recently joined a number of Wisconsin towns in approving a resolution calling for a constitutional amendment that would require half of the revenue in the transportation fund to be distributed to local governments.

The chances of such an amendment being passed are slim at best. But its backing by the towns is a cry for help that deserves a response from state officials. Most gas tax and fee revenue is spent on new highways, while the essential transportation infrastructure of local roads is deteriorating. The consequences of that will be felt not just by town residents, but by everyone who travels on local roads.

Roads are a challenge for towns in other ways. Unlike municipalities, most towns don't have road maintenance employees or equipment (the Town of Cedarburg is an exception). For many years, the towns have contracted with the County Highway Department for road work.

It has been a smooth-running, efficient arrangement. Towns get the benefit of the county's equipment and expertise. The highway department gets steady business that helps pay for its overhead, which is a benefit to taxpayers, including those who live in towns.

The Town of Port Washington, nonetheless, is not a satisfied customer. Last year it gave the

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contract for summer road work that had been done by the county to private companies that charged less. Now it is considering taking snow plowing away from the County Highway Department too.

This has all the appearances of a bad move made for a dubious reason.

According to Town Chairman Jim Melichar, the town is considering privatizing snow plowing because the county cannot guarantee that plowing will be completed by 7 a.m.

Melichar said that not having roads plowed earlier is a hardship for town residents who have to commute long distances to their jobs. The town government has adopted standards saying roads must be cleared by 5 a.m.

That may be an unreasonable standard. It's safe to say that most residents of Ozaukee cities and villages have experienced snowstorms when their streets were not plowed before 7 a.m.

Reliability, more than timing, should be the priority for the town. With county snow plowing, there is no doubt the job will get done and done well—with state-of-the-art equipment, well-trained operators and a knowledge of town roads based on years of experience.

If taking a flyer with a private contractor doesn't pan out, there could be long-term consequences. County Public Works Director Bob Dreblow said if towns take snow plowing work away, his department would have to "downsize personnel and equipment and there's no going back."

Which means that if a private contractor isn't up to the job, town residents could be stuck with a big problem—and "stuck," as in a snow drift, is the operative word.

Privatization is overrated as a means of dealing with government responsibilities, particularly in the case of snow plowing.