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Build better roads for less

By Bob Chernow, for SBT
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Some of my friends recently complained about how we build roads in Wisconsin. One thought we spend too much, the other too little.

But neither of them asked the right question. How can better roads be built for less?

The DOT's 2000 long-range plan calls for \$21.4 billion to be spent over 21 years, but they know that the state will be short \$5.2 billion. What is the purpose of recommending expenditures when there is no money?

What do we need to do to get better roads for less? Here are some suggestions:

1. It takes 12 years to plan for a road project. We need to shorten this time to five years. If we set this as a goal, we can do this.
2. Cost controls need to be implemented. One successful idea that the DOT has used for the Marquette Interchange is to have DOT engineers monitor progress weekly for changes in materials, energy, and engineering and then adjust the project if needed. This audit approach should be used for every major road project.
3. The direct and indirect costs of building roads need to be identified. For instance, what is the cost to local businesses for projects that drag on for months?
4. Research and development must be controlled by the DOT and not by the industry. Alliances with neighboring states and the federally sponsored Transportation Research Board need to be expanded. Emphasis needs to be directed to building longer lasting, quieter roads with lower maintenance. One example might be SafeLane, a new product developed by Cargill to keep roads free of ice. This could reduce the cost of de-icing chemicals and salts, the time spent applying them and the negative impact on the environment.
5. We should create park and ride islands. Even without light rail, buses could reduce traffic and parking problems.
6. The road builder's lobby is powerful. We need to reduce pay-to-play by imposing the same rules that the municipal bond industry does. If you want to bid for state business, you limit your political contributions to \$250, otherwise you don't get state business.
7. We need to reform our current bidding system to encourage competition. Several firms got light punishment for splitting the state up geographically for bids. The lobby controls such items as the size of bids, the type of bonding, etc., that restrict competition.
8. The number of changes made on projects needs to be reduced. Better planning and forecasting can achieve this.
9. A long-term maintenance program to preserve and extend roads needs to be better funded and organized. Maintenance is not sexy, but done right, it will save money.
10. A set of statewide restoration standards is needed. The regional telecommunications commission that I chair has created such a set of restoration standards, and they have been adopted by many municipalities.
11. Road builders need to adopt "best methods" for construction. Compliance with these best methods could save the industry money because equipment would need less cleaning, and water and soil could be better controlled.
12. DOT staff, not outside consultants, should do environmental impact studies. They would do a better job.

We spend a large part of our state budget on roads. Better management and planning, and on-site controls, will yield more for less.

Bob Chernow is a Milwaukee businessman.