

**From:** [Cassie Steiner](#)  
**To:** [Transportation Commission](#)  
**Subject:** Beltline PEL: Jan 7 meeting #91384  
**Date:** Monday, January 5, 2026 3:09:33 PM

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Hi City of Madison Transportation Commission -

I saw that a discussion of the Beltline PEL is on the January 7 meeting agenda, so I wanted to share an organizational sign on letter that was sent to WISDOT about the project on behalf of 10 different organizations. I hope that it can help inform your discussion.

Thank you for looking into this important topic, and I look forward to hearing what action(s) you decide to take,

Cassie Steiner

Dear WISDOT Major Studies Project Manager Jeff Berens,

The undersigned organizations are in opposition to an additional general purpose lane moving forward in plans for the Beltline Corridor.

There are many parts of the Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) study that we support: improved local road crossings, bike and pedestrian connections, park and ride options, and transit priority improvements.

We are writing with the request to remove “Or +1 General Purpose Lane” from the plan as it moves forward into the NEPA process.

The City of Fitchburg has already issued a resolution opposing the expansion of the Beltline highway, and according to WISDOT’s own summary of comments, members of the public are also largely opposed to an additional lane. At the 2024 public input meeting, it was reported that “the main themes that were heard include to focus on multimodal components, and adding additional mainline or general purpose lanes to the Beltline was generally not favored throughout the corridor.”

**The Beltline corridor and residents in the region need the following:**

**Solutions that actually work** – expanding highway lanes is an extremely costly and ineffective way to address traffic congestion. Transportation for America conducted a study of highway expansion projects, and in almost every case, traffic congestion got worse

within 2 years of construction ending.

**Public health and air quality** – air pollution to communities proximal to highways increases risks of asthma, cardiovascular disease and more. Students near large highways miss more days of school and experience more difficulties in focusing and studying. Additionally, there is a big environmental justice component to this; several of Madison's low income housing projects, lower income neighborhoods and communities of color are immediately adjacent to the Beltline, causing a disproportionate negative impact on already impacted neighborhoods.

**Transportation access** – adding new highway lanes is one of the most costly transportation infrastructure choices, especially compared to transit, walking and biking improvements. Not only does this prioritization impact funding available to multimodal transportation projects, but increasing the number of lanes makes crossing the highway more difficult, segregating the city on each side of the highway.

**Greenhouse gas emission reductions** – Dane County and several cities along the Beltline have climate plans that include decreasing carbon emissions in the transportation sector. One of the ways in which this is done is by prioritizing walking, biking and transit projects over projects that increase the amount of miles that vehicles travel in the region. The Dane County Climate Action Plan specifically recommends changing how traffic impact assessments are conducted, "so that environmental impacts are measured in terms of added Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) instead of highway level of service, to promote infill development and multimodal transportation improvements." The County and cities within it should request that WISDOT analyze the impact that added lanes would have on VMT and carbon emissions and prioritize projects accordingly.

**Lessons from past transportation decisions and good data-driven decisions** - In the 1950s, transportation engineers argued for a plan that would have made most of the Madison isthmus a highway corridor, saying that the population in the region would be unable to grow without this project. More than 70 years later, the population in the region has more than tripled without the need for a multiple lane highway through what is now downtown Madison. Additionally, in the past several years, the region's population has continued to grow faster than the rate of Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT), indicating that changes in travel and work preferences are resulting in fewer car trips than in the past. The Beltline study points to population and to VMT increases to justify this proposal, but that data does not align with the reality that is playing out in the region.

**Water quality and flood mitigation** - additional impervious surfaces add to regional flooding, and additional highway runoff adds pollution to nearby waterways. Several communities in the region have focused initiatives on decreasing salt runoff from roadways into water during winter months. Additional lanes (and related additional salt use) add up over time. With several lakes and rivers in the Madison area already experiencing high levels of pollution, we should not be worsening the problem.

**Affordability, access and support for the local economy** - as mentioned above, adding highway lanes costs a lot of money, especially when compared to other alternatives like repairing existing infrastructure and improving transit, walking and biking. Walking, biking and public transit are important to working class residents, who are disproportionately people of color in Dane County. Prioritizing highway expansion over this infrastructure inequitably harms people of color and low income communities. With current economic hardships, it is irresponsible to spend millions or billions of taxpayer dollars on infrastructure that will worsen the problem it is set out to improve. At the same time, connections to job opportunities, healthcare and childcare for all residents, including those who do not drive, are of critical importance. Further, expanding the highway may impact access to neighboring businesses.

**Alignment with local projects** – Fitchburg, Madison and Dane County have opposed additional lanes on the Beltline, and there are local transportation changes that are not compatible with an additional lane on the Beltline. An example of a related local project is the construction on Gammon Road. WISDOT is trying to increase throughput at Gammon, but this is one of the highest concentrations of bike/ped car crashes, particularly involving kids. Because of the crash history of Gammon here, Madison is planning to do a lane reduction on Gammon (a few blocks north of the beltline). This means WISDOT would expand lanes on the Beltline and increase throughput on Gammon, all while the city is reducing lanes on the same road to increase safety.

**Protecting the region's gems like Yahara River and the arboretum** – the University of Wisconsin - Madison Arboretum is one of the most loved outdoors spaces in the region. The Beltline already bisects the arboretum, which garnered opposition when the highway was originally built. The Yahara River is another unique ecological and recreational feature in the region that would be impacted by a Beltline expansion. Expanding the highway's footprint would have a negative impact on these wonderful features of the Madison area.

There are several good proposals within the PEL that would improve transit, walking, biking and local road connections. However, an additional lane on the Beltline would harm our

ability to address these objectives, would cost billions of dollars, and would undermine other improvements suggested in the PEL.

WISDOT should remove the addition of a general purpose lane from the Better Beltline studies and future projects, including plans that move into the NEPA process.

Sincerely,

Sierra Club - Wisconsin Chapter  
Midwest Environmental Advocates  
1000 Friends of Wisconsin  
Madison Area Bus Advocates  
Wisconsin Transit Riders Alliance  
Healthy Climate Wisconsin  
Wisconsin Bike Fed  
Madison is for People  
Strong Towns Madison  
Madison Bikes



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