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Council OKs capital budget; bus fares, road projects are hot topics

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Madison's City Council made it through a marathon seven-hour meeting Tuesday night before overwhelmingly passing the capital budget, the first half of the city's 2009 budget, early Wednesday morning.

Discussion of the capital budget was preceded by nearly three hours of public testimony on issues ranging from preserving funds for the Madison Art Fund to advocating for greater homeless services to criticizing a program that would require landlord registration in Madison.

That the most popular item in the public hearing, which brought dozens of Madison residents to the City Council's meeting Tuesday, was opposition to the proposed Madison Metro bus fare increase in the operating budget was not surprising. That many of them also supported amendments in the capital budget to delay road expansion projects, however, took even one of the sponsors of the amendments by surprise.

Ald. Robbie Webber, who co-sponsored with Ald. Marsha Rummel five amendments to delay road construction projects on the far east and west sides of town, said she was taken aback by the number of people who spoke in favor of the delays.

East-sider Michael Barrett, vice-president of Madison Area Bus Advocates and owner of consulting company focused on sustainability, emphasized the financial cost of road expansions, many of which include long-term borrowing paid off in the operating budget, to Madison Metro and the city as a whole.

"The massive road budget is now squeezing the operating budget and Madison Metro with massive borrowing costs," he said.

Moreover, Barrett said, the environmental costs of "social engineering people into cars" could lead to fewer opportunities for businesses and jobs to come to Madison because of high air pollution levels.

Margaret Bergamini, a member of the city's Transit and Parking Commission, spoke in favor of delaying road expansion and against raising Madison Metro fares, noting in particular that Madison Metro could not service many of the road expansions under current funding levels.

"I don't object to roads," she said. "However, I do object to poorly planned roads. We would not in the city of Madison permit the building of a subdivision that was unsewered, so why do we permit the building of neighborhoods that we know Madison Metro cannot serve and will not be able to serve?"

Other speakers in favor of an operating budget to keep Madison Metro fares at current levels included Laurie Wermter, a member of the Madison Area Bus Advocates, who called the bus fare increase a penalty

for those choosing alternative transportation.

"The proposed increase will penalize those who ride the buses, although those who ride the buses are providing an environmental benefit for all who live and work in the city," she said.

Many other speakers tied their remarks on Madison Metro to the issue of fairness to low-income riders and those who cannot or do not drive cars, with some opposing an amendment to remove additional funding to Transit for Jobs, the city's program to provide free bus passes to low-income riders, as part of a way to prevent a fare increase.

"We're here tonight to support the \$40,000 increase in the Transit for Jobs program contained in the operating budget. However, we cannot support the proposed bus fare increase, so we're a little split," said Linda Ketchum of the Madison-area Urban Ministry.

In particular, Ketchum said the fare increase would amount to an additional \$260 for someone who rides the bus to and from work five days per week. At minimum-wage levels, this increase would be equivalent to losing a full week of wages, which "is an undue burden and hardship on a family at that income level," she said.

Though the council did not discuss the operating budget amendment to maintain the bus fares at current levels, they did take up the issue of road expansion in capital budget talks Tuesday night.

Rummel said she put the issue of delaying road expansion forward not necessarily to see the projects pass, but to address issues with building "big arterial roads" rather than grids and neighborhood streets that would promote walkable neighborhoods, as well as to point out the impact of the projects' costs on the operating budget each year.

City Engineer Larry Nelson cautioned against delaying the projects another year, however, because of the potential for increased costs, including the potential to lose federal funding because of the delays as well as not being able to take advantage of a slow building economy to negotiate lower construction costs from developers.

"If you don't want to do the project at all, but I don't see what a one-year delay really gets us except I'm pretty confident we're going to see the need to spend a lot more money as well as take the risk of the loss of federal funds," he said.

Webber pointed out, however, that she had singled out several of the road projects -- particularly those at County M -- in the 2008 capital budget and was told to wait because they were currently in the planning process.

"Please don't tell me that we can't stop because that was my point last year, that it's a freight train," she said. "When exactly do we get to say no?"

The amendments to delay the expansion of County M failed 5-15, but questions from Webber and Ald. Brenda Konkel led to a successful amendment that would change the process of road planning to give the council early input.

Konkel's amendment would ask city engineers to bring the city's yearly transportation improvement plan to the council by May 15 each year, before it goes to the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). The MPO

often decides which street projects to put forth for federal funding, and council members decided unanimously that they should get a look at which projects may be put up for funding first and decide if they support the road plans.

"I always support more information," Webber said in favor of the amendment. "I think it's a wonderful idea for the council as a whole to have an idea where we're planning on spending millions of dollars every year, and make sure those are the projects that we do want submitted to MPO."

In other action on the 2009 capital budget Tuesday night, the council:

-- Voted against removing funding for the Madison Art Fund.

-- Added funding for police to purchase two "autochalking" machines to improve parking enforcement.

-- Added planning money for a public market in Madison.

-- Voted against removing planning money for proposed Central Park and a parking garage behind the Madison Municipal Building.

-- Voted against restoring full funding for traffic-calming projects.

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