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Reimagine Wisconsin: Strengthen Wisconsin's Infrastructure and Communities

Our economy is only as strong as the communities within it. We need to assertively pursue strategies to make sure that all our communities can thrive and attract new residents and businesses—from the rural towns in northwest Wisconsin to central Milwaukee and everywhere in between. Key to strengthening our communities is the process of acknowledging and reversing policies that have stripped investment from neighborhoods of color.

Here are three strategies we can use to ensure that Wisconsin communities are great places to live, work, and do business.

Expand resources for communities

Our local communities are the lifeblood of Wisconsin, and we need to make sure they have the resources they need to remain economically vibrant. The state government provides financial support to local governments, but the amount provided has fallen by almost half over the last twenty-five years. The result is that local governments have been less able to invest in local roads, neighborhoods, and services, and have been forced to rely on taxes and fees that fall most heavily on residents with the lowest incomes and communities of color. State lawmakers should take a different approach and make sure that local governments get the resources they need to provide critical services.

Connect communities to high-speed internet

Having access to high-speed internet services is a cornerstone of economic development in today's economy, especially given that the pandemic has forced many people to work or attend school from home. Businesses, employees, and schoolchildren in some parts of Wisconsin don't have broadband access, limiting economic development and academic achievement. To make sure families and children aren't left behind as we shift to high-speed internet, we should invest in partnerships to expand access in underserved areas and expand the use of telecommunications cooperatives to provide internet services.

Support a dependable transportation network

Wisconsin communities need a modern transportation network that is regularly maintained and repaired. We can accomplish that by increasing investments in public transportation. Public transit serves at least three functions: it helps those who don't drive get to where they need to go, it can be a part of a strategy to reduce pollution, and it can help to reduce racial disparities in employment by providing access to jobs in different neighborhoods. Yet state funding for mass transit remains below levels of a decade ago, and local taxpayers are bearing an increasing proportion of the cost for diminishing service levels. Increasing state support for public transportation would mean more bus routes, more job access, more support for disability transit, and increased opportunities for people of color who are disproportionately burdened by cuts in transit service.

Conclusion

To have an economy that works for everyone, Wisconsin needs strong communities. Local communities plow roads, protect children from neglect and abuse, immunize residents against deadly diseases, provide public transportation, and perform other vital services that families and communities need to thrive. Wisconsin needs to make sure that communities have the resources they need to help residents succeed at work, at school, and at home.