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Town Roads- A Catalyst for Economic Success

All around Wisconsin, from Beloit to Bayfield and everywhere in between, local economies are kept afloat in a number of ways. In areas of Southern and Central Wisconsin, agriculture serves as the keystone of local economies. In the Northwoods and Door County, the deciding factor in economic success is tourism. And, in places such as Milwaukee and the predominantly blue-collar Fox Valley, manufacturing and industries help to stimulate the economy. But, despite the stark differences found between varying parts of the state, most areas have one common thread: This economic activity is sustained by strong infrastructure. One vital aspect of the infrastructure here in America's Dairyland is the presence of good town roads.

First of all, town roads play a key role in agriculture, a sector in which Wisconsin has national notoriety. Pat Faessler, a farmer in the Green County town of Spring Grove (near Monroe), sat down with to explain that town roads are vital to sustaining local agricultural operations.

"Some states call them farm-to-market roads, and that's what they are," Faessler explained. "Without town roads, you're not going to get the products off of the land." As a result, town roads are key to ensuring that farming operations can sustain their bottom-lines and stimulating local economies.

Although agriculture is undeniably important to Wisconsin's economic big-picture, there are other aspects of our state which are enhanced by town roads as well, one of which is tourism. According to Don Hamblin, the roads supervisor in the Sawyer County town of Hayward, town

roads are vital in pleasing the tourists and potential homeowners that come to Hayward. “I believe tourists enjoy the same things our local residents enjoy about better quality roads, such as low dust problems, fewer potholes, and clean ditches,” Hamblin said. “I believe people like to live in neighborhoods that have high quality roads, and much of our tourism includes people who buy second homes or cabins in our community.”

However, Hamblin was quick to note that potentially poor roads may give off a sour impression of his neck of the woods. “As a road supervisor, I’ve been cursed with noticing road quality wherever I go, but for most people I believe the only qualities that are noticed are the poorer qualities in roads,” Hamblin stated. “Tourism in the area includes many seasonal residents that provide many jobs in the Hayward area for local contractors and tradesmen, and although we all definitely enjoy good quality roads, many in the area would move elsewhere if the tourism industry waned because of poorer quality roads.”

Though the roads may not be the sole reason a person visits an area, they are definitely key in baiting the hook for return trips, or even encouraging someone to settle down and live somewhere. As a result, people will shop at Hayward’s stores, fill up at Hayward’s gas stations, or grab some cheese curds at Hayward’s restaurants. Although Hayward is by no means the only place in Wisconsin affected by tourism, it certainly sticks out as a prime example.

Finally, several of the Badger State’s industries are reliant on town roads. “Much of the industry up here [near Hayward] is logging, but with wood markets being very competitive and not very profitable lately [...] with poorer quality roads, this wouldn't be feasible,” Hamblin said. Industries of many types, not just logging, are the lifeblood of many parts of Wisconsin, and good roads help to encourage these entities to put down roots in our state.

It's tough to deny that town roads are important. They help to sustain agriculture, tourism, and industry in Wisconsin, among other things. But how are they maintained? And, furthermore, what challenges face towns in keeping these roads in good shape?

Back down in Green County, Faessler gave me the inside scoop. As the Spring Grove town chairman and a member of the town board for 27 years, he provided insight on the maintenance of roads from his managerial perspective. In his case, this sometimes involves forging relationships with the roads' frequent and established users. In this case, he detailed the interactions with a local 2000-head dairy farm.

"Spring Grove Dairy, just up the road from our farm, runs truckloads of silage, and it did beat the roads up. With bigger equipment and bigger loads, the roads have to be in good shape," Faessler explained. "Instead of getting bent out of shape, we as a town just put some extra money into those roads and fixed them up. We asked the dairy to put a few thousand dollars down to help us, and they did."

Towns need all the help they can get, as road budgets are oftentimes tight.

"This is a more plausible threat with tighter budgets over the past few years. It often seems like the highway improvement budget is the only flexible part of the budget able to absorb cutbacks when other departments still have bare minimum budget needs," Hamblin said.

"With fewer dollars to work with, we have to be conscious of how much towns are spending," Faessler added. "We're sitting good right now, but we also have a lot of projects that we want to do."

In closing, it's clear that town roads are nothing short of integral to spurring economic development in Wisconsin. They sustain agriculture by allowing crops and other goods to get to market, they sustain tourism by making a positive impression on out-of-towners, and sustain

industries by encouraging businesses to stay in our state. It's clear that these roads warrant funding and attention, because without them, Wisconsin would be worse off.