

Off-Track: The Failure of Light Rail in Milwaukee

Neal A. Johnson

Introduction

The debate and discussion over light rail in Milwaukee has been a long and contentious battle that has played out for almost a quarter century, through the East-West Corridor study. The last remaining portion of this study is the proposed 1.9 mile downtown Milwaukee streetcar line slated for construction in the coming years. This paper explores the light rail issue during the 1990s and the discussion surrounding the proposal as well as the political pandering that took place throughout this debate. I will be exploring this issue through the lens of urban political theory to illuminate the complex processes at play and to explain how the light rail issue fits into this framework.

Theoretical Framework

Urban governmental decision-making is a complex process that urban scholars have tried to unravel and explain using many different theories and explanations. Clarence Stone used Atlanta to explain how the formal governing responsibility may lie with the local government, but the “resources and the scope of authority” lie in the hands of private entities.¹ That is why he saw urban governmental structures as part of a larger urban regime. He defined an urban regime as an “informal arrangement by which public bodies and private interests function together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions.”² However, the regime perspective assumes that there is a substantial body of business interest and other actors that work together to advance an agenda, something that is not found in every city, including Milwaukee.

This is where Richard DeLeon’s concept of the urban “anti-regime” fits in. Using San Francisco as an example he showed how ineffective the actors were in advancing their

¹ Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta 1946-1988* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 6.

² Ibid.

progressive agenda because of internal conflicts over the governing program.³ The progressives of the city, while making up a majority of the populace, could not agree on their goals for the future of the city, thus presenting a divided voice that accomplished much less divided than they could have united. Unlike Stone's Atlanta case where divergent groups compromised on a unified vision for the city, in DeLeon's San Francisco example the anti-regime was ineffective in advancing any agenda at all because of the lack of a united coalition of actors. Additionally, DeLeon argued, the anti-regime functions to obstruct and complicate the exercise of power.⁴ Unlike Stone's discussion of "power over vs. power to," DeLeon sees the anti-regime as blocking power to restrict and limit the scope of the governing agenda.⁵ The Atlanta case showed how coalition building became an effective tool for advancing ideas, something that never happened in the San Francisco case. In Milwaukee there is a somewhat ineffective governmental structure where the presence of an "anti-regime" undermines any effective coalition building to advance political goals.

Coalition-building is a key component to being effective in advancing an agenda. DeLeon discussed Madelin Landau's observations that a hurdle to coalition building is actors fulfilling short-term goals, which lead to the "ad hoc" nature of these relationships. Consequently, politicians find wedge issues that appeal to their base, further polarizing them from the political center.⁶ In the Milwaukee case the Waukesha County Republicans formed an ad hoc coalition around the light rail issue and polarized themselves from the more liberal Milwaukee light rail advocates. Additionally the Milwaukee light rail advocates didn't present a united front and were no match for the unified opposition of the Waukesha County Republicans.

In Stone's follow-up to the Atlanta case he described how "economic growth has spread far beyond Atlanta's city limits" and that businesses no longer feel the need to align with local government.⁷ This pattern can be seen throughout the United States, where

³ Richard DeLeon, *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992).

⁴ DeLeon, *Left Coast City*.

⁵ Stone, *Regime Politics*; DeLeon, *Left Coast City*.

⁶ DeLeon, *Left Coast City*, 174.

⁷ Clarence Stone, "The Atlanta Experience Re-examined: The Link between Agenda and Regime Change," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Planning Research* 25 (2001): 20-34.

many businesses instead of being located in downtown and therefore having a vested interest in development in the area, are now more focused globally and have separated from the governing coalition. Milwaukee, while still having a good core of downtown business has also felt the decentralization of business to the periphery and by the 1990s, when the light rail debate was in full swing, there was no strong push from the business community to move the project along. In addition since they were a decentralized group that had no core objectives around which to coalesce, the prospects of forming a coalition were bleak, much less a regime.

These concepts and ideas serve as the framework for my look at the proposal for light rail transit in Milwaukee. I contend that while Stone's concept of urban regimes serves as a basis for looking at urban politics it doesn't fit in all cases. I see DeLeon's concept of the anti-regime as a more plausible explanation for the outcome of the light rail debate in Milwaukee. I also see the decentralization of business from downtown to the suburbs as another key component to explain the lack of a business elite interested in downtown development, something light rail would surely bring. Finally, it is also important to look at the specific debates, both politically and publically, on the issue and how light rail was deemed an important and contentious issue that would shape the future of the greater Milwaukee area.

Introduction to Light Rail

Light rail systems, while reflecting back on early twentieth century transportation technology, are modern and efficient in every way possible. As a commentary on the subject illuminates "Some people may think of light rail as going forward to the past. Today's light rail transit technology has dramatically evolved from the old electric streetcar and interurban railways that existed in many American cities until the 1940s and 50s and in Milwaukee until 1958." The document further discussed how "Light rail vehicles today operate as one vehicle or in trains' as a single unit or several hinged units (articulated); they are powered from overhead wires; run on the surface in reserved lanes, medians, or railway rights-of-way. They usually have preference when operating alongside other forms of transportation; require minimal stations facilities, and can also operate in a subway or

on an elevated guideway.”⁸ While they use a guided track, they are flexible in their utility and implementation. So while it is easy to compare modern light rail systems to the systems that once existed in urban areas all around the world, these modern light rail systems are different by providing a much more efficient and flexible service than their previous iteration.

The Original Milwaukee Proposals

The proposal for light rail started in 1990 when the City of Milwaukee “in an ongoing process of developing long range goals and objectives for the region” initiated a study “to examine the potential for establishing light rail/commuter rail transit in Milwaukee and southeast Wisconsin.”⁹ The East-West Corridor Study was started to consider mass transit as well as freeway improvements to improve access to the suburbs west of Milwaukee where many of the area jobs were located.¹⁰ The Department of Public Works’ request for proposal discussed how “The impacts of a fixed guideway transit system on regional land use, economic activity, environment, quality of life and quality of transportation service, along with costs, will provide a basis for the evaluation of the plans.”¹¹ Furthermore, “In order for a fixed guideway to be successful there must be clear benefits over a no build option.”¹² The proposal also pointed to several advantages for this type of transportation including:

Reduction in travel demand on other modes, reduced transportation facilities cost, enhancement of economic development, improved land use efficiency, strengthening of neighborhoods and the central city, energy and air pollution reduction, inducement of public/private development projects, and overall gains in mobility and accessibility.¹³

⁸ “Light Rail in Wisconsin.” [author unknown] June 1990, Box , Marc Duff Papers, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Library Archives.

⁹ City of Milwaukee, Department of Public Works, “Request for Proposal,” 9 March 1990, Page 1, UWM Center for Transportation Records, Box 2, Folder 17, UWM Archives.

¹⁰ “Historical Background,” City of Milwaukee website, Accessed April 24, 2013,
<http://www.city.milwaukee.gov/router.asp?docid=7220>

¹¹ “Section 6.1 [edited]” in “Request for Proposal” City of Milwaukee Department of Public Works, 9 March 1990, UWM Center for Transportation, Box 2, Folder 17, UWM Archives.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

So early on while there was a desire for fixed rail transit, there was also a need for this option to have a clear advantage over other alternatives.

An I-94 transit way was proposed and Wisconsin received \$289 Million of Interstate Cost Estimate (ICE) funds from the federal government for the project. It would have provided for a two-lane road exclusively dedicated to bus service between Waukesha County and Downtown Milwaukee. In 1991, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) came along. It allowed local officials to divert these funds to alternative solutions, so light rail became one of the alternatives to be studied. Because of inaction on the part of local officials the money was dwindled down to \$241 million.¹⁴

The Early Debates

In a September 26, 1990, news release, State Representative, Marc C. Duff of New Berlin, a suburb located in Waukesha County, voiced concerns about a light rail line being considered through the northern portion of suburban New Berlin. He stated that because the line was proposed through a highly residential area of New Berlin he advised that "It is very important that people become informed about this issue. Because the line is proposed through a highly residential area of New Berlin. I am concerned about how it could adversely affect homeowners."¹⁵ Alderman Mary Claire Cora hinted at another set of issues by saying; "Having a light rail mass transit system run through New Berlin would have a dramatic effect on our neighborhoods and area residents."¹⁶ While it is unclear exactly what Cora meant by these remarks, one might infer a class- and racially-based argument against certain types of people that would be afforded access to New Berlin. State Representative Marc Duff not only expressed concerns about residents in his community and their property values falling, but also expressed concern with the method of payment for the system. He felt that "any attempt to have the property tax pay for the system would

¹⁴ "Interstate Cost Estimate (ICE) Funds", Wisconsin Dept. of Transportation Files, Call# (2007/090), Box 19, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

¹⁵ "Press Release," Marc C. Duff, State Representative, 26 September 1990, Marc Duff Papers, UWM Archives.

¹⁶ Ibid.

unfairly affect the suburban areas." He saw an expansion of bus transit as a better option than rail transit.¹⁷

Some Waukesha County businesses were also opposed to the light rail system. Here is one New Berlin business owner's testament:

As a business owner and more importantly as a taxpayer in the City of New Berlin, Waukesha County, I am writing you to express my concerns regarding the proposed regional transit system for Southeastern Wisconsin [...] having a business miles from the proposed routes, I can see no use of transporting employees to the suburbs if there is no way for them to get to their final destination once they have left your system. Until all the communities to be served by your system have public transportation, it is useless to transport people out to the suburbs and drop them off in the middle of nowhere. Any system, other than expanding the use of existing freeways, must be financed for the most part by USE of the system and NOT TAXES.¹⁸

Early resistance to light rail in Waukesha County was clear, and led to this portion of the proposed light rail system being scrapped. The November 13, 1990 *Milwaukee Sentinel* indicated the newly proposed western terminus could be the County Grounds in Wauwatosa or the Zoo.¹⁹ So now that the focus of the light rail system was in Milwaukee County, the question is would it run into the same resistance as in Waukesha County?

Support Begins to Emerge

A May 28, 1993 *Milwaukee Sentinel* article exclaimed that "Milwaukee and Waukesha county officials agreed in principle Thursday that light rail should be a component of the area's future transportation system." Additionally, Waukesha County Executive Finley said that he supported light rail, mainly because it would not extend into Waukesha County, while also saying, "Taxpayers must realize that alternatives are needed other than adding freeway lanes to ease traffic jams. We cannot build our way out of congestion."²⁰ In October of 1993 Kenneth Lamke of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* declared that, "It's on track" in reference to the light rail proposal that was discussed at a state

¹⁷ "Comment Sheet – Southeast Wisconsin Transit Corridor Study" by Rep Marc Duff, Marc Duff Papers, UWM Archives.

¹⁸ Letter from Brian Gaylord, Castle Stamps, Inc. of New Berlin to James Beckwith at Department of Transportation, 20 April 1992, Marc Duff Papers, UWM Archives

¹⁹ Jeff Bentoff, "Metro light rail system urged," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 13, 1990.

²⁰ James B. Nelson, "Plan for light metro rail gets nod from officials," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 28, 1993.

transportation advisory committee meeting. He further stated that “until the meeting, it would have been reasonable to argue that light rail was still more a pipe dream in the mind of Mayor John O. Norquist, its driving force, than a real prospect.” There were even indications of the Mayor and Governor Tommy Thompson working together to move the project along.²¹ In September of 1993 Milwaukee County Executive Ament came out in support of light rail contingent upon a new tax or other funding source outside of property taxes to fund the system.²² Waukesha County Executive Daniel M. Finley, Waukesha Mayor Paul G. Vrakas, and Glendale Mayor Donald Voith also showed support for light rail at a meeting with local and state officials. However, there were still concerns about funding, especially on the part of Mr. Finley.²³ So while Republican officials in the early 1990s at local and state levels were not necessarily for light rail, they were also not adamantly opposed to it.

As Bruce Murphy writes in his commentary on the issue, “Now, I have never been a big fan of light rail, but after examining DOTs data, it’s beginning to look pretty good.” This was after reviewing the DOT study that new high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, or as they’re more commonly known ‘car pool lanes,’ would only decrease the commute from Waukesha to Milwaukee by six minutes. After looking over the DOT data, Murphy stated that “light rail would be several times cheaper per new rider than HOV lanes.” He also saw that installing the light rail service before the impending reconstruction of the Marquette interchange could further increase ridership serving as an alternative during the massive construction project.²⁴

A 1992 study by the UWM Center for Economic Development looked at the potential for economic development around Light Rail Transit (LRT) corridors. While the center does not believe in an *if you build it they will come* approach to economic development, they do predict that with careful coordination and planning the City and local neighborhoods can capitalize on potential development. Furthermore, the potential for revitalization of inner-

²¹ Kenneth R. Lamke, “It’s on track: Top officials agree on light rail for Milwaukee,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 22, 1993.

²² Tom Daykin, “Ament speech to endorse light rail,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 16, 1993.

²³ Tom Daykin, “More officials stoke drive for light rail,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 20, 1993.

²⁴ Bruce Murphy, *Milwaukee Magazine*, July 1996

city neighborhoods was possible especially with a possible alignment along Fond Du Lac Avenue to the Capitol Court shopping center.²⁵

The Opposition Begins to Form

Milwaukee businessman George Watts led the opposition to the light rail system in Milwaukee. Alderman Annette E. Scherbert and Supervisor Anthony J. Czaja joined Watts in his crusade to stop light rail with hopes of influencing Governor Tommy Thompson.²⁶ Watts also formed a group named ALERT (Against Light Rail Transit). ALERT was a “coalition of civic minded leaders to educate, persuade and convince their fellow citizens that light rail would be a disaster for the Milwaukee metropolitan area, its taxpayers, and its transportation needs.”²⁷ Watts was the spokesperson for ALERT, and the Chairman of George Watts and Son, Inc. He was also an advocate for freeway building with the headline of an opinion piece he offered titled, “City needs freeways, not rail.”²⁸ George Watts even went so far as to make a racial- and class-based argument against light rail by saying it “brings in strangers who are not only a threat to your property, but to your children.”²⁹

A 1998 study about light rail in Milwaukee helped the cause of light rail opponents. The study showed that the light rail system would not reduce congestion in the East-West Corridor, one of the main reasons for the study. The study further stated that the system, and transit in general, would not work to reduce congestion in Milwaukee because of population densities that have fallen dramatically since the 1960s. It further showed the dramatic decrease in transit ridership over the past few years, and it predicted continued decline.³⁰

While many Milwaukee County officials were in support of light rail, others were not; including County Supervisor Mark A. Borkowski. In early 1994 Borkowski proposed a

²⁵ Univ. of Wisconsin: Center for Economic Development, “Light rail in Milwaukee: an analysis of the potential impact on economic development,” 1992.

²⁶ Tom Daykin, “Ament speech to endorse light rail,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 16, 1993.

²⁷ Wisconsin Department of Administration, Secretary’s Subject File, Call # (2000/047), Box 12, Folder 18, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁸ George Watts, Newspaper clipping [no paper name given], Wisconsin Department of Administration, Secretary’s Subject File, Call # (2000/047), Box 12, Folder 18, Wisconsin Historical Society.

²⁹ Larry Sandler, “Light rail no free ride for criminals, officials say,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 13, 1997.

³⁰ Wendell Cox, “Light Rail in Milwaukee,” Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, 1998.

referendum be put before the voters to “let the taxpayers decide whether they want to have light rail.”³¹ So advisory referendums came in the November 1994 election where Waukesha County residents voted down light rail and expanded bus and car pool systems by 3-to-1 and 2-to-1 margins, respectively. They did, however, support increased taxes to pay for expanded freeways and other road projects, but with only 53% support. The Milwaukee County suburbs of Whitefish Bay and Bayside voted against light rail in Milwaukee County with 52% and 61% of voters casting “no” ballots, respectively. So while the Waukesha County voters were more heavily against the project, there was still an uphill battle to be fought in suburban Milwaukee County.³²

The Debates

In July of 1994 the *Milwaukee Sentinel* featured opinions of both sides of the issue. Two local businessmen offered their take on opposite sides of the debate over transportation in the Milwaukee area, including light rail. Jeffry Christofferson spoke in favor of light rail as a way to think about the future and how options other than driving help to solve the long-term problem of congestion, especially during commute times. He also pointed out that light rail works better than buses alone to increase mobility for those that don’t have cars. On the other side of the coin George Watts continued his assault on light rail where he warned “At risk is your freedom to live where you wish and drive where you wish and to choose your driving companions” and asked citizens to attend the upcoming Department of Transportation meetings asserting that “we’ll kill it dead!”³³ These two viewpoints summarized much of the discussion on the light rail issue that would play out over the coming years.

Mayor Norquist was one of the loudest advocates of the light rail system. He dismissed the assumption that bus transit would be as popular as light rail as being “shortsighted.” The Mayor had confidence in the Governor to support the light rail project saying, “I believe the Governor wants balanced transportation. He’s proven it with

³¹ James B. Nelson, “Borkowski seek referendum on rail,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Jan 7, 1994.

³² “Light rail off track in 3 localities,” *Milwaukee Journal*, November 9, 1994.

³³ “Opposing views on transportation,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 16, 1994.

improving AMTRAK service between Milwaukee and Chicago.”³⁴ However, there was still some tension between the Mayor and the Governor, since the Governor was proposing an increase in the gas tax to pay for transportation projects in the state. Mayor Norquist asserted that “state transportation funding priorities need more reconstruction work than the highways.”³⁵ Norquist and his cohorts wanted more money for transit, including light rail. As Norquist so eloquently put it in an interview, “Widening roads to solve traffic congestion is like loosening your belt to solve obesity.”³⁶ The Mayors comments hit on another issue of great importance. The Mayor had a loud voice that spoke out against the Milwaukee suburbs as well as much of the rest of the state of Wisconsin. This arrogance was something many Milwaukeeans found distracting further polarizing the two sides of the light rail debate.

After public meetings were held on the issue it was agreed that “there’s certainly enough public support to continue to study and develop light rail options on paper in Milwaukee County,” said Mike Maierle, a planner for the State Department of Transportation.³⁷ *Milwaukee Journal* writer Deborah Locke stated that “[Brookfield] City officials say it’s fine if Milwaukee County wants to go ahead with recommendations for light rail construction. But Brookfield residents shouldn’t have to pay for it.”³⁸

By 1996, Waukesha County officials were starting to grow weary of the debate. Waukesha County Executive Daniel Finley, in speaking of the light rail proposal, said, “It’s time to declare it dead.” He further argued that improvements to I-94 were “being held hostage by light rail.”³⁹ Finley suggested that the way to a compromise was the take light rail out of the equation.⁴⁰

Citizens voiced their discontent with the transportation debate. Floyd Taylor of Milwaukee declared, “I’m sick and tired of the poverty-pandering tug of war taking place

³⁴ “Milwaukee East-West Corridor Transit Study,” Study Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes, 16 May 1994, Page 11, DOT Records, Call# (2007/090), Box 19, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁵ Larry Sandler, “Foes want Thompson to get out of his car,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 16, 1995.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Phil Nero, “Meetings help to unclog jam of regional transit concerns,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 3, 1995.

³⁸ Deborah Locke, “Light rail hits bumps with council,” *Milwaukee Journal*, February 2, 1994.

³⁹ Larry Sandler, “Light rail talk hurts I-94 work official says,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 17, 1996.

⁴⁰ Larry Sandler, “Forum/Speakers view future very differently,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September, 13 1996.

between Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist and Gov. Tommy Thompson over mass transit.” This sentiment was echoed by fellow Milwaukeean Julie Czerwinski who suggested that the Mayor move if he wanted streets with no cars and crowded buses.⁴¹

Most of the discussion centered on the expense of light rail and how hard it would be to capture new riders. However, one of the arguments that was routinely ignored was that light rail would have significantly improved mobility for transit riders. A *Milwaukee Journal* article described how “A combination light rail/bus transit system would decrease travel times throughout Milwaukee County by 14% to 47% over current bus service.” The article further stated that “The more light rail is involved, the greater the time savings.”⁴² What this article illuminates is that the debate between the two sides completely ignored the ease of mobility for Milwaukee residents that were already using transit and how their increased mobility was a key issue. However, these proclamations of reducing transit times were ignored in the future debate of the issue.

Eventually this discussion would shift away from the importance of the issue for the future of the Milwaukee Metropolitan area, no matter what the outcome, and move to the issue of funding the system. This change in the discussion challenged the future of light rail in Milwaukee and as debates continued on both sides, the funding issue was still in question.

The Alternatives Emerge

In late 1993, alternative 9c started to receive a good amount of support. This alternative called for the construction of a separated busway between Waukesha and downtown Milwaukee, and light rail in Milwaukee County, although the exact route for light rail is unclear from the documents.⁴³ Many of the local Mayors were in support of this alternative. Milwaukee Mayor Norquist boasted that “This concept best meets the current

⁴¹ “We’ve had enough transit bickering,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 30, 1998.

⁴² Phil Nero, “Light rail, buses would trim travel time, officials say,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, Jan 31, 1995.

⁴³ Letter from Brookfield Mayor Kathryn Bloomberg to Transportation Secretary Charles Thompson, 10 November 1993, DOT Records (2007/090), Box 19, East-West Corridor, Wisconsin Historical Society.

and future transportation needs of the City of Milwaukee and the metropolitan area.”⁴⁴ City of Waukesha Mayor Paul Vrakas voiced his support citing the need for “a balanced system of transportation, improvement of the air quality, central city redevelopment, and easy access to employment.”⁴⁵ Glendale Mayor Donald Voith even went so far as to state that “An obvious solution to the Milwaukee metropolitan area transit problem is to keep as many commuters as possible out of their automobiles;” which begins to explain his objection to a park-n-ride lot in Glendale which he saw as a waste of land that would become valuable once the light rail system was in-place.⁴⁶ Brookfield Mayor Kathryn Bloomberg supported the alternative, but voiced her concern for funding of a light rail system that would lie totally within Milwaukee County.⁴⁷ Wauwatosa Mayor Maricolette Walsh voiced her opposition to the light rail portions of the proposal because of the failure for the plan to include the Milwaukee County grounds in the plans.⁴⁸

At the same time, conflicts among City of Milwaukee officials also became clear. In a letter from the Common Council to the Mayor, local officials “were stunned” to find out that the Mayor had advised his City Engineer to inform the City Transportation Commission that the Common Council endorsed alternative 9c, when in fact the Mayor and the Common Council had signed off on a different alternative only weeks earlier. The letter went on to bash the Mayor, accusing him of “insubordination” and reminding him that “Right now a majority of the Common Council opposes the light rail proposal.” In their earlier resolution the Common Council had laid out specific criteria to be presented to the Governor as he drafted the locally preferred alternative.⁴⁹

In December of 1993, Governor Tommy Thompson announced that a locally preferred alternative was agreed upon by the study committee and recommended to

⁴⁴ Letter from Mayor Norquist to Wisconsin Department of Transportation, 22 November 1993, DOT Records, Box 19.

⁴⁵ Letter from Waukesha Mayor Paul Vrakas to Wisconsin Department of Transportation, 10 November 1993, DOT Records, Box 19.

⁴⁶ Letter from Glendale Mayor Donald Voith to Wisconsin Department of Transportation, 9 November 1993, DOT Records, Box 19.

⁴⁷ Letter from Brookfield Mayor Kathryn Bloomberg to Wisconsin Department of Transportation, 26 November 1993, DOT Records, Box 19.

⁴⁸ Letter from Wauwatosa Mayor Maricolette Walsh to Wisconsin Department of Transportation, 25 November 1993, DOT Records, Box 19.

⁴⁹ Letter from the Milwaukee Common Council to John Norquist, 24 November 1993, DOT Records, Box 19.

Transportation Secretary Charles Thompson. This alternative included: A dedicated bus and carpool “transit way” between Waukesha and downtown Milwaukee, light rail stretching from Glendale into downtown Milwaukee and west to the Milwaukee County Grounds, and dedicated lanes for transit on certain surface streets.⁵⁰ Despite this consensus modifications to the study were considered and Waukesha County Republicans continually tried to get light rail dropped from the plans.

In early 1997, the locally preferred alternative (or LPA as it was commonly known) was presented and seemed to be the best bet for getting any type of consensus among the divergent groups. Overall the three big decision makers, Milwaukee Mayor Norquist, Milwaukee County Executive Ament, and Waukesha County Executive Finley seemed to agree on a plan that included light rail in Milwaukee County from the Zoo to Downtown and into the third ward, HOV lanes on I-94, and expanded bus service between Waukesha and Milwaukee. Norquist didn’t want the HOV lanes on I-94, since he saw them as serving Waukesha County commuters and not Milwaukee residents, and Finley didn’t want light rail to be funded by the state, and by extension Waukesha County residents. Despite this there seemed to be a consensus building around this compromise of sorts. However, the main issue came down to funding and who was going to pay for it and how.⁵¹

Funding, Finley and the Governor

The issue of local funding sources paid a huge role in the debate over light rail. There were some who were in support of an increase in the gas tax, while others supported an extra sales tax. There was also a debate as to whether the taxes would be state-wide or just restricted to Milwaukee and/or Waukesha County.⁵² In either case a Regional Transit Authority (RTA) would have to be created to administer service and charge the tax. Documents show a proposal for a .5% sales tax or up to a 5 cent per gallon gas tax in addition to current taxes.⁵³ A February 5, 1997 letter to Department of Transportation Secretary Charles Thompson from six Milwaukee County representatives noted opposition

⁵⁰ “Press Release” from Governor Tommy Thompson, 17 December 1993, DOT Records, Box 19.

⁵¹ Memo from David P. Schmiedicke to Mark D. Bugher, “East West Corridor Briefings,” 30 January 1997, DOT Records, Box 19.

⁵² “Critical Local Revenue Issues,” May 1994, DOT Records, Box 19.

⁵³ “Analysis of Local Tax Option Alternatives For Motor Fuels,” March, 2, 1994, DOT Records, (2007/090), Box 19.

to any increase in taxes to Milwaukee County residents stating that the funding for any final project should come from state funds. The letter was signed by Republican and Democratic representatives alike such as Scott Walker, Sheldon Wasserman, Marc Duff, Tony Staskunas, Jeff Plale and Scott Gunderson. The one thing they could agree on was that none of them wanted increased taxes to pay for light rail.⁵⁴ Here is where the discussion on light rail shifted from an important issue no matter what side you're on, to a debate focused on who should fund the system. Should state and federal dollars fund construction, or should Milwaukee County residents have to pay for the portion not covered by federal funds?

The funding issue appears to be the reason for the Governor's change in attitude, at least on the surface. A September, 1996, *Journal Sentinel* article discussed the funding issue and options to relieve it but noted that none of the proposals had been implemented.⁵⁵ A few months later in December of that same year, an audit "warned of a major funding crisis in transportation programs statewide that – without a tax increase – threatens the planned rebuilding of the East-West Freeway as well as aid for bus and other mass-transit systems." The paper pointed to a huge spending increase since Governor Tommy Thompson came into office – most of it on highways.⁵⁶ In an apparent about-face Thompson sided with Waukesha County Executive Finley that "light rail should be funded entirely with federal and Milwaukee County money" as the Governor declared that the state didn't have the money to fund the light rail system.⁵⁷

Shortly thereafter, playing into the debate on the funding issue, the Governor declared that "not one nickel" of state money will go to fund light rail in Milwaukee.⁵⁸ A City of Milwaukee lobbyist, Patrick Curley, asserted that, "Thompson was swayed by the opposition of the Waukesha County Republicans and conservative radio talk show hosts." However, Kevin Keane, a Thompson spokesperson, said it was simply that the Governor

⁵⁴ Letter from six Wisconsin State Assembly members to Secretary Charles Thompson of the Department of Transportation, 5 February 1997, Marc Duff Papers, UWM Archives.

⁵⁵ Larry Sandler, "Regional thinking still percolates," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 13, 1996.

⁵⁶ Steven Walters, "Transportation funding crisis looms, audit warns," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, December 17, 1996.

⁵⁷ Larry Sandler, "Leaders take sides on issue of light rail," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 20, 1997.

⁵⁸ Larry Sandler, "Thompson altered stance on light rail," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 12, 1997.

learned of the high costs of light rail and saw a more pressing need for other projects, also citing “public opposition to the project.”⁵⁹

In April of 1997 plans that included light rail were presented to both the Milwaukee and Waukesha County boards where they were passed with a slight caveat; officials agreed “to accept and acknowledge the plan but not to formally approve it.”⁶⁰ However, Waukesha County Executive Finley was urged by seven Republican state legislators and a flood of calls to his office to veto the bill. It is unclear if Finley was aware of the key role he played in the future of the East-West Corridor project; after all, his veto on the Waukesha County Board resolution would halt further study of light-rail in the East-West Corridor. As Senator Brian Burke of Milwaukee said, Finley’s veto “really does invite both partisan and regional gridlock.”⁶¹ Finley vetoed the bill, setting off a firestorm of criticism from Milwaukee city and county officials. Ament accused Finley of being “arrogant” and “short-sighted” and Supervisor Anthony Czaja called the move “the first shot in a political cold war.” Milwaukee officials promised retaliation by eliminating bus and car pool lanes from his preferred option.⁶²

There was also a threat from community groups and labor unions that they might submit discrimination complaints because the freeway improvements don’t benefit inner-city residents the same as light rail improvements could.⁶³ These were not idle threats, and two legal actions were filed with the United States Department of Transportation. As the City of Milwaukee website explains:

The Governor's decision to continue to study freeway improvements while shelving mass transit improvements recommended in the same Locally Preferred Alternative had an adverse impact on low income, minority, and disabled residents of the City of Milwaukee in violation of federal civil rights laws and in violation of the comprehensive intermodal planning process mandated by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act. The complaints asked the U.S. Department of Transportation to terminate federal funding for the highway components of the Locally Preferred Alternative unless and until the Governor and WisDOT agreed to

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Jim Rowen, “The railroad not taken,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 14, 2008.

⁶¹ Betsy Thatcher and Larry Sandler, “Republican lawmakers lobby for rail veto,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 15, 1997.

⁶² Larry Sandler and Lori Holly, “Cold War over I-94 Corridor,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 18, 1997.

⁶³ Ibid.

continue the study of the mass transit improvements including the light rail system.⁶⁴

These two lawsuits eventually spurred a compromise for how to allocate the \$241 million in federal funds.

In September of 1997, a *Journal Sentinel* article declared that “Governor’s vow derails light rail in Milwaukee.” As Chuck Thompson, Wisconsin DOT Secretary wrote, “Considering the lack of consensus on transportation alternatives, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation will not be spending any state or federal funds in this budget to perform preliminary engineering on either light rail or special lanes.” However, the issue now became that “Wisconsin couldn’t use any of the \$241 million if officials ruled out both light rail and special lanes,” as William Fung, the Federal Highway Administration’s Wisconsin division chief proclaimed. But Republican officials were able to stop the project in its tracks when Representative Scott Jensen declared that, “Light rail is dead.”⁶⁵ By the end of 1997 light rail was dropped from the state’s plan for the East-West Corridor and it became a local issue.⁶⁶

Compromise

In December of 1997 Larry Sandler of the *Journal Sentinel* wrote about the possibility of a compromise brewing that could save the \$241 million in federal money originally allocated for light rail or HOV lanes (or both). He saw a consensus around a variety of highway and transit projects including reviving talks of a possible Regional Transportation Authority.⁶⁷ Finally, the April 26th, 1999, editorial page of the *Journal Sentinel* exclaimed that officials had finally reached a compromise on the East-West Corridor debate. The compromise included:

- The rebuilding of the Marquette Interchange

⁶⁴ “Historical Background,” City of Milwaukee website, accessed April 24, 2013, <http://www.city.milwaukee.gov/router.asp?docid=7220>

⁶⁵ Amy Rinard and Larry Sandler, “Thompson pledge derails light rail,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 30, 1997.

⁶⁶ Wisconsin Dept. of Administration Records, Series 2515, (2003/0070), Box 2, 1997 East West Corridor, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁶⁷ Larry Sandler, “New effort made on transit proposals,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Dec 8, 1997.

- The rebuilding of the 6th Street Viaduct
- The razing of the Park East Freeway
- The building of a state park adjacent to Summerfest
- Public transit improvements in downtown, perhaps including a small light rail system

This last piece of the compromise is what is still ongoing today with the plan for a 1.9 mile streetcar system linking parts of downtown Milwaukee with the intermodal station on St. Paul Avenue. While the future of the streetcar system is still unknown, it is all that remains of a bitter battle over light rail that started over two decades ago.

Analysis

The narrative described above explains the complexity of the light rail issue in Milwaukee. So how do the specifics of the light rail case fit into the broader context of urban political theory? Here I present an analysis of how to understand the light rail debate and the dynamics at play through the framework of urban political theory.

In the 1990s Milwaukee began to feel the effects of decentralization as people and jobs moved out of the city and into the suburbs. The biggest concentration of population and employment movement was to Waukesha County, 10 miles west of Downtown Milwaukee. This exodus of people and jobs from Milwaukee was the reason for the East-West Corridor study, to better connect residents of Milwaukee with Waukesha County jobs, and Waukesha County commuters with downtown Milwaukee jobs. Because of this decentralization, the dominance of downtown Milwaukee was in question as businesses that were once concerned with downtown redevelopment were now less connected to the city and therefore less concerned with these goals. The Milwaukee area business community did not feel the need to involve themselves in the contentious East-West Corridor debate. Similar to Stone's follow-up to the Atlanta case, the Milwaukee business community was decentralized and left downtown Milwaukee pro-light rail and pro-development advocates without one key ingredient for coalition building: support of local business elites and other actors.

Coalition-building, as discussed earlier, is important to advancing political goals. These coalitions can range from a regime-style structure with informal relationships between government, business and other actors working to advance an agenda over a long period of time, to a more ad-hoc coalition of interests formed around a particular issue or agenda that is typically short-lived. The latter describes the anti-light rail coalition, spearheaded by the Waukesha County Republicans that presented a united opposition to stop the light rail proposal in Milwaukee. Opposition formed early-on as Representative Marc Duff and Alderman Mary Claire Cora of New Berlin adamantly opposed the construction of light rail in Waukesha County. Waukesha County businesses joined the coalition in fighting this “useless” system. Soon the Waukesha portion of the proposal was dropped.

Initially, the Waukesha County Republicans supported light rail in Milwaukee County with Waukesha County Executive Finley coming out in support of the project in 1993. However, the issue of funding was still to be determined and was a major concern for this newly formed coalition. The light rail opposition received another boost when Milwaukee business man George Watts joined the opposition to the project, forming and becoming the spokesperson for ALERT (Against Light Rail Transit), and providing a needed ingredient to make the anti-light rail coalition effective. Soon County Executive Finley was aligned with his Waukesha County Republicans to stop light rail, where Finley cited the funding issue as his key reservation and eventually vetoed the resolution to continue the study of light rail in Milwaukee County. The final boost to the coalition came as Republican Governor Tommy Thompson joined the light rail opposition by declaring that, “not one nickel” of state money would go to fund light rail in Milwaukee. Eventually, with state funding gone, the project was declared dead and removed from the state’s plan for the East-West Corridor.

The discussion surrounding the light rail issue was largely centered on the importance of the issue. While there was no predominant public view for or against the project, as evidenced by the battle between people of both sides of the issue, however it was a clear that this issue was important and would shape the future of the Milwaukee metropolitan area. Actors on both sides played into this discussion by highlighting how

their side of the issue would provide a better outcome for Milwaukee. The 1994 *Milwaukee Sentinel* piece that lays out the two opposing viewpoints on transportation explained and developed some of the arguments on both sides that would become part of the discussion surrounding the importance of the light rail issue. Then the discussion shifted to the issue of funding for the light rail system. Finley and Thompson played into this shift in focus and used the funding issue as their reason for stopping light rail. While the anti-light rail coalition prevailed, the discussion on the topic is still brewing as the current Milwaukee streetcar proposal is waiting in the wings.

Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist, a staunch light rail advocate, played into this discussion and made his own points about the importance of this issue. However, at times the Mayor's arguments were a bit protracted and didn't seem to resonate with the citizenry. Also, many felt light rail was a personal pet project of the Mayor's and therefore really didn't buy into much of his logic and reasoning. His argument for light rail being the saving grace for the City of Milwaukee played into the discussion on the importance of the issue, but resonated as lip service to many. Additionally, his decidedly anti-suburban mentality only served to exacerbate the problem leading to excessive conflict with Waukesha County officials.

Milwaukee, in many ways, followed DeLeon's framework of the anti-regime throughout the light rail debate. The light rail advocates, similar to the progressives in DeLeon's San Francisco example, failed to present a united front or have a coherent voice on the issue. At the same time, however, the Waukesha County Republicans quickly formed an anti-light rail coalition that fought tirelessly to stop any proposal for light rail in the Milwaukee area. In this way the structure of Milwaukee government was obstructionist instead of cooperative. Unlike Stone's example of Atlanta where different actors worked together and compromised as a governing coalition to accomplish long-term goals, Milwaukee area politics were obstructionist, where instead of compromising on a solution, both sides dug in their heels and fought it out, with the end result of accomplishing nothing. The compromise that did come out of the civil suits was forced by the legal system and most likely would have never come about otherwise. So while there were many vocal supporters of the light rail project, support for the project was decentralized. As Larry

Sandler, a writer for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* asserted, the main reason light rail succeeded in places such as St. Louis and Baltimore was because of a broad-based coalition of business leaders, politicians and other actors that supported the project; something that Milwaukee lacked.⁶⁸

A bitter battle played out over the issue of light rail, until light rail was declared ‘dead’ by Rep. Scott Jensen of Brookfield in September of 1997.⁶⁹ This paper has explored the battle over light rail in Milwaukee, specifically looking at the decentralized light rail supporters and their battle with the anti-light rail coalition that formed in nearby Waukesha County and eventually made its way to the Governor’s mansion.

Overall, the anti-light rail coalition headed by George Watts and the Waukesha County Republicans fought to stop the light rail proposal in Milwaukee. The light rail advocates, while fighting hard for the project, were never able to form a coalition to garner support for the project. Decentralization and suburbanization led to a Milwaukee business sector that was less interested in Milwaukee development and therefore largely uninterested in how light rail would benefit Milwaukee. The early discussion surrounding light rail focused on the importance of the project and what it would mean for the future of Milwaukee. Mayor John Norquist played into this discussion championing the building of light rail, but never really connecting with the citizens. Many residents were tired of the continued mudslinging between the two sides and just wanted a compromise.

The largely inefficient structure of Milwaukee politics is most easily explained as an anti-regime that really works to obstruct power. Even though the anti-light rail coalition was able to exercise temporary power over the issue of light rail, their power was used to simply restrict the power of the light rail advocates. Additionally, their *ad-hoc* coalition was formed only to kill the light rail proposal and not champion other collective goals. This obstruction of power leads to a governmental structure that really accomplishes nothing because of a lack of collective power and a lack of common goals. Since Milwaukee area governing officials are not able to coalesce around a common set of long-term goals, their

⁶⁸ Larry Sandler, Presentation on the East-West Corridor Study, Transportation Policy and Planning Course, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, April 24, 2013.

⁶⁹ Jim Rowen, “The railroad not taken,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 14, 2008.

power to accomplish anything is severely compromised since the governing power is obstructed by the presence of this anti-regime.

In the end the Governor, with his declaration that the state would not fund light rail in Milwaukee, and County Executive Finley, with his veto to allow further study of light rail in the East-West Corridor, stopped light rail in its tracks. This is party politics at its best where the Republicans used light rail as a wedge issue to appeal to their base constituency and distance themselves from liberal light rail proponents, such as Mayor Norquist. The discussion on light rail, while not decidedly for or against the project, focused on the importance of the issue for the future of Milwaukee. However, the funding issue quickly moved to the forefront of the common discussion and became an argument used by the anti-light rail coalition to justify their opposition to the project.

In the early 90s the Governor was working with both sides to try and find a compromise that worked well for everyone. The alternatives presented showed a willingness to work together on a balanced approach to the East-West Corridor. However, Milwaukee along with Madison, are little drops of blue in a sea of red on the state level, and perhaps the biggest struggle for Tommy Thompson was how to address the needs and desires of Milwaukee, while still appealing to his Republican constituency. The Governor and County Executive Finley were swayed away from cooperation with Milwaukee City and County officials and used state funding concerns as their reason to kill light rail. They played into the arguments presented by George Watts, conservative talk radio, and their Waukesha County Republican comrades no doubt to appeal to the voters of Waukesha County, the reddest County in the state.