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**Milwaukee streetcar flap leads to slush fund charge**

Gov. Tony Evers has ruled out the possibility that a portion of the $75 million in general revenue set aside for transportation projects could help fund the Milwaukee streetcar.

But Republicans say the issue isn’t over and continue to raise the possibility of a fall veto override attempt.

Department of Transportation Secretary Craig Thompson in late July announced the Evers administration will create a committee that includes agency staff and representatives of local government to evaluate applications for the $75 million. Thompson said possible uses of the money could include transit and indicated the city of Milwaukee could apply for funding its streetcar.

But after blowback on those comments from Republican leadership in the Legislature, Evers said on July 22 he recently spoke Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, who pledged the city would not put grant money toward the streetcar.

“I guess that’s kind of a dead issue,” Evers said.

A Barrett spokeswoman told WisPolitics.com the city will “work to get our fair share of funding for local roads.”

Following the DOT secretary’s announcement, Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, tweeted, “The governor is taking money from local road construction to fund Milwaukee’s trolley to nowhere. Rural Dems should push back – veto override!”

Later in the day, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, tweeted his chamber was “seriously” considering an override as well, calling the possibility money would benefit the streetcar “ridiculous.”

Evers knocked the two Republicans for “the knee-jerk reaction of going to that spot.” Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes, meanwhile, noted “the door was just open for them just to apply” for grant money.

“I think that got totally blown out of proportion,” he said.

But a Vos spokeswoman fired back that the issue “isn’t dead.”

“The Republican Legislature allocated these dollars to fix local roads,” spokeswoman Kit Beyer said in an email. “Thanks to Governor Evers’ veto, the DOT now has a $75 million slush fund.”

Evers also pitched the recently signed state budget as “a down payment on the people’s budget.”

He highlighted “the largest dedication of new ongoing revenue to the transportation fund in a generation” and a capital budget that arrested “eight years of neglect” of projects in the state and the UW System.

“Going forward, we’ll have lots more economic activity and thousands of new jobs and millions in tax revenues,” Evers said.

Thompson on July 18 announced the administration will create a committee that includes agency staff and representatives of local government to evaluate applications for the $75 million. Those proposals that would also boost economic development will be given preference, though Thompson pledged there will be geographic balance in how the projects are picked.

The state budget Republican lawmakers approved included $90 million in supplemental funding for local road projects. It also included a provision that directed $35.1 million to towns, $32 million to counties, and about $22.8 million to villages and cities.

Evers reduced that pot of money to $75 million and nixed the Legislature’s directive on how to split it up.

Thompson said possible uses of the money now could include transit, whereas Republicans directed the money to road work.

Still, Thompson said the administration’s plan will include a similar ratio as the budget. Towns will split up $29.2 million of the money with $26.7 million set aside for counties, and $19 million for cities and villages.

Under the administration’s approach, the grants would cover up to 90 percent of a project’s cost with the local government covering the rest. The projects would also have to be completed within six years.

Thompson said at the time that the city of Milwaukee could apply for funding its streetcar. If it scored well with the committee, it is possible some of the money set aside for cities and villages would go to the project.

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