A push to Just Fix It

New campaign strives for transportation money

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With a relatively new campaign, industry officials are hoping that business owners and local office-holders will be able to succeed at what roadbuilders and state officials have tried to do for years: Persuade lawmakers to raise additional money for transportation projects.

To that end, the organizers of the Just Fix It campaign — started early this year as a way to demonstrate grassroots support for roads, rails and other means of getting around — plan to hold a series of meetings around the state starting next week. The first event will take place on

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GET YOUR FIX

Organizers of the Just Fix It campaign will embark Tuesday on a series of meetings meant to drum up support for repairing and expanding Wisconsin’s transportation system. Each of the meetings will be preceded by breakfast, starting at 7:30 a.m., and set from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m.

The meeting’s dates and places are:
• May 17 in the La Crosse area at the Stony Creek Hotel and Conference Center, 3060 S. Kinney Crossing, Onalaska
• May 19 in the Eau Claire area at the Chippewa Valley Regional Airport, 3600 Starr Ave.
• May 24 in the Green Bay area at Foth, 2121 Innovation Court, De Pere
• May 25 in the Waukesha area at the Waukesha County Department of Transportation Administration Building, 10200 W. Watertown Plank Road, Waukesha
• May 26 in the Janesville area at the Joliet Conference Center at the Holiday Inn Express, 3100 Whirlpool Place
• June 1 at the Waukesha County Central Wisconsin Airport, 100 CWA Driv, Mishkam.
To reserve a seat, send an email to debby.jackson@blawclawson.org or call 608-255-7041.

HELPING HAND(OUT)

For group of MATC apprentices, scholarship goes a long way

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For Ralphie Ramos, $1,000 is turning out to be the bridge between a government job and a career in the trades.

Ramos, who is busy attending classes while gaining on-the-job training at the Northwestern Mutual Tower and Commons project in Milwaukee, is among 20 participants in the Milwaukee Area Technical College’s apprenticeship program who recently received a $1,000 scholarship.

The Great Lakes Tools of the Trade scholarships are intended to help recipients pay for expenses such as tuition, tools and work clothing. The 20 students make up part of the 200 construction and industrial-trades apprentices who received a Great Lakes Higher Education Corp. scholarship this year.

For the apprentices in this program, who are around 28 or 29 years old on average, the money “means a lot,” said Nick Triscari, apprenticeship coordinator at MATC.

Financial aid, such as the scholarship awarded to Ramos and others, is a good way to retain apprentices, who are most likely to quit during their first year, said Triscari.

Ramos knows of that tendency from first-hand experience. When he was only 19 and living in Colorado, he started an apprenticeship only to stop short of completion so he could move back to the Midwest and be closer to his family.

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Campaign's message: Lawmakers have safe harbor

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Tuesday in the La Crosse area and will be followed by others on subsequent days in the Eau Claire, Green Bay, Waukesha, Janesville and Wausau areas.

Organizers say one of the main goals is to show that a strong transportation system benefits more than just the roadbuilders and Wisconsin Department of Transportation officials who are often easily dismissed as acting out of crass economic interests when they call for more money to be raised for highways and other infrastructure. Craig Thompson, executive director of the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin, said lawmakers need to be reminded of how much businesses depend on being able to easily move goods and people from place to place.

Thompson said his hope is that the Just Fix It meetings will be attended not only by local officials and other policymakers but also business owners. He said talks are still afoot over what the next steps will be, but the plan is to eventually relay the opinions expressed at the events to state lawmakers.

“We are going to have a roundtable with local leaders and businesses about what transportation challenges they are seeing and how that affects business and the bottom line,” Thompson said.

The Just Fix It campaign has already begun using technology to give the public a means of directly showing lawmakers their support. Anyone can sign up at www.tdwwisconsin.org to receive monthly messages, drawn up by the Transportation Development Association, that can then be sent on to elected representatives using email, Facebook or Twitter.

Mark O’Connell, executive director of the Wisconsin Counties Association, said his hope is that the massive show of support will give lawmakers a sense that they will have a “safe harbor” at election time. Too often, he said, legislators shy away from raising gas taxes or other sources of revenue simply out of a misplaced fear that they might lose their seats.

“We want to say, ‘It’s OK, and you are not going to get unelect ed for that,’ ” O’Connell said.

“What the Just Fix It campaign is saying that there is this safe harbor because everybody is in support of transportation.”

Thompson said the benefits to business should already be apparent. He noted the announcement last week that IKEA plans to build a store just south of Milwaukee in Oak Creek. Local officials have said the recent addition of an interchange connecting Interstate 94 to Oak Creek’s Drexel Avenue played a large role in attracting the company.

“We’ve had a lot of studies and commissions, and we have a lot of numbers that bear out what our transportation problems are,” he said. “But for a lot of folks, what we need is the story behind those numbers.”

Thompson was among a group of industry and state officials who, in 2011, formed a committee charged with identifying flaws in the state’s transportation system and proposing ways to mend them. Two years later, the Transportation Finance and Policy Commission released a report finding that the state would need to raise an additional $5.8 billion in the next 10 years to simply maintain what it already has; among the suggested means of raising that money was a 5-cent increase in the state’s gas tax.

Lawmakers never took up the proposal, though.

Industry perceptions hard to overcome

Scholarship, from page 1

“It was always a dream of mine to become an electrician,” he said. “I just put it on hold.”

Before his current attempt to once again pursue a career in construction, Ramos, now 38, was employed by Milwaukee County as a laborer.

“I really liked being a public servant and probably would’ve stayed in my career there,” he said.

His decision to reconsider construction came following some encouragement he received from a group of electricians while he was working on a project at General Mitchell airport. Ramos said they told him they thought he had the requisite knowledge and ability.

Another impetus behind his career switch was Wisconsin’s 2011 Act 10, a law that both required most government employees to contribute more to pension and health benefits and stripped them of the bulk of their collective-bargaining rights. That sudden loss of many of the advantages of public employment ended any misgivings Ramos might have felt about trying to become an electrician.

He said he now looks forward to learning where his new career will take him.

MATC has scheduled a commencement ceremony for Friday. Graduates who go into construction should find that there is no lack of demand for what they can offer. Industry officials have long complained of a shortage of skilled workers.

Many in the industry argue, however, that there is still not enough being done to encourage the young to consider a career in the trades.

Triscari said many industry officials still believe that high schools are not promoting construction as an alternative for students who are not bound for college. Many parents, meanwhile, might still worry that it’s hard to make a living in the trades.

The reality is, “these are good-paying jobs,” Triscari said.

From Ramos’ perspective, the blame goes beyond the schools. Whatever the reason, he said, children and parents now seem to have a lower opinion of the building trades than they did years ago.

“No one’s really helping … these young kids think like we used to,” he said. “People usually like a mentor, being an older family member, taking these young kids aside, especially in middle school and high school, (to) plant a seed and make a light bulb turn on.”