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By neglecting bikes, transit, Wisconsin is losing young people: column

Bad transportation policies contribute to 'brain drain'

Jun. 20, 2014 | 2 Comments

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A biker cycles along a path in the Uptown neighborhood of Minneapolis. By failing to invest in infrastructure for bikes and public transit, Wisconsin risks losing millennials. / AP Photo/Adam Geller

For the last decade, Wisconsin has been experiencing a "brain drain," with more college graduates leaving the state than staying. Based on what we've learned from numerous recent surveys of millennials, including a new WISPIRG Foundation survey of 530 college students at 14 Wisconsin campuses, one factor could be our crumbling transit infrastructure and lack of driving alternatives.

Growing evidence suggests that young people choose where they want to live largely on the lifestyle and amenities of those communities, and that they gravitate toward more walkable, bike-able and transit-friendly communities where lifestyles are less dependent on driving.

Could modernizing transit, bike and pedestrian infrastructure be one strategy to reverse the brain drain and make Wisconsin communities a destination where millennials seek to locate?

What young people want

The new WISPIRG Foundation survey found that 60 percent of college students said they would be at least "somewhat more likely" to stay in Wisconsin after graduation if they could live in a place where they could get around without driving. Of that group, a majority said the ability to live in places with transportation alternatives would make them "much more likely" to remain in Wisconsin. Eighty-four percent of respondents said it was either "very important" or "somewhat important" for them to have transportation options other than a car to get around.

Written by Bruce Speight For Gannett Central Wisconsin Media

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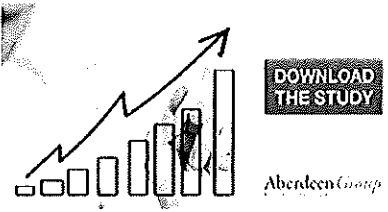
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communities to thrive in today's knowledge-based economy. Studies suggest that the most successful cities and economic regions in the 21st century will be those that attract and retain young college graduates and are places they want to locate.

Harvard economist Edward Glaeser has found that the presence of college graduates has been the best social or economic predictor of a city's future growth in each of the last several decades. He shows how this outcome stems from greater skills and resulting higher productivity that causes faster growth.

Most relevant to Wisconsin, the research shows that the effect is particularly pronounced among cold-weather cities and those cities that have experienced some level of decline.

In other words, attracting and retaining young, educated talent is particularly important to Wisconsin cities.

Out-of-touch policies

In this context, economic development isn't about chasing smokestacks or courting particular companies. It's about being a place with a lifestyle and amenities where millennials want to be and where employers, as a result, want to locate.

If political and business leaders want to recruit and retain young talent in Wisconsin, then they need to reconsider our state transportation priorities and make sure we provide the transit, bike and non-driving transportation options that young people gravitate towards.

The problem is that the transportation preferences of today's young people contrasts starkly with current Wisconsin transportation policies. Over the past 10 years — a time when Wisconsinites, like Americans, generally have been driving less and seeking other transportation options — state leaders have cut state funding for transit and other non-driving modes, while state spending on highway expansion has increased greatly.

We already have some of the most highly ranked public universities in the country, which attract brilliant minds from all over the world. We should be doing more to keep them here once they graduate.

Enjoy a limited number of articles over the next 30 days. Policymakers and the public need to be aware that state and federal policy, dominated by road-building, are fundamentally out of step with the transportation patterns and expressed preferences of growing numbers of students and young professionals in Wisconsin. Out-of-touch and uninformed transportation policy decisions risk undermining economic development and losing the

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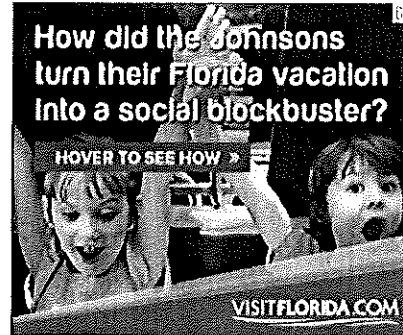
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opportunity to attract the young talent and educated workforce that are important to Wisconsin's economic prosperity in the future.

Bruce Speight is the [Director](#) of WISPIRG, the Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group, online at www.wispirg.org/.

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