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Rail Could Ease Commuters' Nightmares

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Hey, here's a nice future for you:

Imagine climbing out of bed in the morning around 4 a.m. You shower, dress and wolf down a bagel and cream cheese on your way out the door, after signing the kids' homework and putting out a bowl of sugar for their breakfast and change for one of the school vending machines they rely on for lunch. You're raising the kids alone, by the way, as are most parents these days.

You get on the road by 5 a.m. and just make it to work by 9. Thank goodness it's easy to find a parking space at your employer's office complex, built on former farmland. You spend the day typing on a computer. Along with the familiar shooting pains in your wrist, your back hurts from the badly designed chair you're sitting on. For "quality purposes," your work is continuously digitally monitored by your supervisor, whose work is likewise and for the same reasons monitored by hers.

You get a half-hour break for lunch and you eat a cheeseburger. To keep alert in your "sick building," where the air quality is terrible and fluorescent lights give you additional headaches, you drink about 10 diet sodas over the course of the day.

Then at 5 p.m. it's on the road again; traffic is normal, so you're home by 9.

The kids are watching TV, having fed themselves with a takeout pizza in the meantime. You briefly join them for some family entertainment, watching this week's round of prisoner executions. At 10 p.m., it's bedtime, to get ready for another day.

You're paid slightly less than someone doing an equivalent job 30 years before, even though you're about 40 percent more productive. Falling asleep at night, you worry about your job security, your firm recently having been bought out by some multinational that has ordered a division "rightsizing." Your worries are well founded, as it turns out, since you're fired the next day. You ask your boss if this is because of competitive reasons and the corporate restructuring and she replies: "No, I just thought it would be fun." This leaves you no legal basis to challenge the decision.

The next day, you have a heart attack. One too many bagels with cream cheese perhaps. (Or maybe you come down with mad cow disease, or some other exotic malady from poisoned food.) Of course you have no health insurance, since that was only provided by your employer. Some time later, you die of cancer. The kids aren't with you when you die.

Sound like a nightmare? Hey, it's only a natural extension of trends we've seen in American working/family life over the past 30 years. Commuting times are doubling every decade or so; most breakfast cereal calories are from sugar; school lunches are increasingly provided by private vendors; occupational injuries mostly come now from "sick" buildings and badly designed office furniture and keyboards - none of which is effectively regulated (even minimal ergonomic standards were recently repealed by George W. Bush); most office work is secretly monitored (Americans have less privacy protection than those in almost any other advanced industrial country); workers are paid less than 30 years ago, even though they are 40 percent more productive (German workers are paid about twice what they were back then); workers have absolutely no right against discharge without cause (this too is unique to the U.S.); heart attacks and cancer are the leading causes of death (and food is increasingly unsafe) in one of the least healthy national diets on earth; virtually all insurance is provided through employers (another oddity of the U.S.); and families find less and less time for each other, and are more distant from one another, in an economy that doesn't value the first and relentlessly increases the second.

Now let's just take one tiny piece of this picture - the commuting part. The Texas Transportation Institute recently released its annual report on traffic congestion in national urban areas and found that snarled, crawling or stopped "rush hour" traffic has grown to six hours a day (three there and three back) - or double what it was in 1982. Here in Wisconsin, where commuting times have already almost doubled over the last decade alone in many areas of the state, the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission - the aptly named "SEWERPAC" - just predicted continuous traffic from 6 to 10 a.m. and noon to 7 p.m. throughout most of Milwaukee, Washington, Ozaukee and Waukesha counties by 2020. One giant, nearly continual, every day traffic jam.

Such congestion is expensive - in lost hours at work, air pollution and the sheer stress of sitting in traffic jams most of your life. Hundreds of billions a year is the national cost, with no end in sight.

Here in Wisconsin, we're a national leader in doing nothing about this. We rank 49th in the nation for using federal enhancement funds specially earmarked for alternative ways of getting to work. And we spend better than 99 percent of flexible federal transportation funds on highway projects, rather than such alternatives like rail.

This is pretty stupid as transportation and environmental policy, since the difference between a rail line and a highway is that one runs just as fast full as empty, while the other does not, and is a lot less polluting to boot. We could avoid part of the nightmare described above, rather

simply, by investing in rail.

But it's also stupid as economic policy, because it misses the enormous employment opportunity for advanced, high-paying jobs that the emerging market for rail is creating among states responding to traffic congestion more sensibly than our own. Since early in the last century, Wisconsin manufacturing has serviced the auto industry. We could do it for the advanced mass transportation systems that the environment and strained commuters are already demanding.

And this is only a tiny part of the employment gains that a greener future might offer us, and that Wisconsin is in a great position to lead.

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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