

Butterfly advocate wants Zoo Interchange pilot project to take flight

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By Molly Willms

The Zoo Interchange reconstruction in the Milwaukee area will give monarch butterflies 33 acres of fresh habitat.

The project will give Barbara Agnew, president of Wauwatosa-based [Friends of the Monarch Trail](#), an opportunity.

She said she wants to use the roadside planting near the Milwaukee County Grounds to show the public and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation that there is a benefit to investing extra in seeds and maintenance.

"I don't know how to connect that dot yet," Agnew said, "but I'm looking."

WisDOT will use a butterfly mix of seeds for the 33 acres next to the interchange project. The mix, which is estimated to cost three times more than typical seeds, will include plants native to Wisconsin and milkweed.

Bill Mohr, WisDOT's supervisor for design of southeast freeways, said the seeds should cost less than \$100,000 in an overall reconstruction project estimated at \$1.7 billion. He said the project's design team decided the reconstruction presented a good chance to try something new that might show a return on the investment.

"Somebody has to be the first," he said.

Time and effort

The Zoo Interchange's use of the butterfly mix will be the first time WisDOT has used species-specific seeds on a roadside and one of only a few times the agency has used a seed mix of plants native to Wisconsin, said Leif Hubbard, WisDOT's state transportation landscape architect.

But it is not the cost of the seeds that makes such plantings rare next to Wisconsin roads, said Leif Hubbard, WisDOT's state transportation landscape architect. The expense usually amounts to a small percentage of the project price, he said.

Rather, Hubbard said, it is the added work needed to get the plants established. And that, he said, can take three to five years.

During that time, he said, maintenance can include spot mowing, herbicide spraying of invasive species or controlled burns.

"That's where the rub comes in," Hubbard said. "There really isn't any set protocol for how that's going to be accomplished. In fact, many times it's not being accomplished."

Hubbard said he is not aware of any specific maintenance plan for the butterfly mix.

The seeding contracts for the Zoo Interchange have not been let, Mohr said, but they probably will include a one- or two-year period during which the contractor would be responsible for weeding.

It is hard to say, Mohr said, whether that will be enough to get the butterfly mix established.

But Agnew said she is determined to do whatever she can to ensure the seeds take root. She said she intends to search for money and volunteers from corporations and nonprofit organizations and might even propose a Mile for a Monarch program as a twist on the Adopt-A-Highway litter control concept.

If WisDOT is willing to try something new, she said, she wants to find the community support to help it succeed.

Success elsewhere

Roadside planting of native species is not a new concept. Iowa was doing it as early as the 1950s, said Mark Masteller, chief landscape architect with the Iowa Department of Transportation.

Now, all new construction projects on state-owned rural roads in Iowa use native plants, and the Living Roadway Trust Fund gives grants to counties that want to use Integrated Roadside Vegetation Management, which includes planting native species.

Masteller said there are too many variables to determine if planting native species results in lower costs.

"Now there are lots of benefits to it," he said, "and some of them are measurable. I don't know how you'd put a dollar amount to them."

Those benefits, he said, include better storm water infiltration, hardiness during extreme weather, erosion control and barriers to keep snow off the road. Those are the types of results, Masteller said, that should make planting native species an attractive option.

But changing the standards for road reconstruction is a slow process, said Tom Van Arsdall, director of public policy for [The Pollinator Partnership](#), a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that encourages native planting on roadsides. In Wisconsin, he said, the best thing to do is start small and make the case to WisDOT on individual projects.

"We're hoping we can work with them," Van Arsdall said, "in a way that can show them that this makes economic sense."

Van Arsdall said local involvement from nonprofit organizations and private companies can show a transportation agency that it will not be alone in shouldering the cost and responsibility of maintaining the plants.

But the most important element to getting WisDOT to plant more native species, Hubbard said, is for the agency to hear from more state residents. For now, though, other transportation-related needs trump plant selection.

"It's basically, we're in the middle, trying to balance all the needs," Hubbard said, "and there are many."

Open to discussions

There are no plans for more planting of native species on other roadsides in the state, Hubbard said, but WisDOT is willing to have the conversation with those who want the practice expanded.

"It is their roadways," he said. "And I mean, you know, we're here using state tax dollars to manage and maintain their roadways, and that's coming from the citizens, and that's really who we work for."

The people who use the interstate near the Zoo Interchange, Agnew said, are be the ones who need to notice and respond to the butterfly mix pilot project.

"That'll be what they see before they see a sign," she said. "They're going to say, 'This is different. There's something good here.'"