Voters approve state transportation fund amendment

By Don Walker of the Journal Sentinel

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Wisconsin voters on Tuesday overwhelmingly approved establishing a constitutional amendment that would prevent governors and legislators from using the state transportation fund for other uses.

The referendum — which passed by a 4-to-1 margin — asked voters if they wished to create a clause in the Wisconsin Constitution that says money generated from using roads, airports, harbors and the like must be used exclusively for transportation. The referendum also asked voters if they wanted to establish a department of transportation in the constitution. Currently, the Department of Transportation and transportation fund exist only under statute.

Proponents said putting the fund in the constitution would ensure that revenue from the state's gas tax and vehicle registration fees be targeted for transportation and not for education, health care or other programs.

The genesis for the referendum came when state elected officials tapped $1.3 billion from the transportation fund to pay for schools and other programs. The move was made by then-Gov. Jim Doyle but was supported by lawmakers of both parties.

The practice of tapping the fund ended in 2011.

A "yes" vote was supported by Craig Thompson, executive director of the Transportation Development Association. Much of the funding for the development association came from the Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association.

Leading up to Tuesday's vote, Sen. Fred Risser (D-Madison) had been the most vocal opponent of the referendum. He said the measure, if included in the constitution, would give the highway lobby a lock on transportation funds.

The referendum completes the process for inclusion in the constitution. Lawmakers approved the measure in 2011 and 2013. In the most recent vote, members of the Assembly backed the measure 82-13. The Senate approved the measure on a 25-8 vote.

Last year, a special commission said the state needs an additional $6.8 billion for transportation over the next 10 years. The gas tax is 32.9 cents per gallon.

Supporters of the amendment said a dedicated fund will benefit not only roads, but rail, transit, harbors, bicycle and pedestrian facilities.