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Testimony – SB 840

Senate Committee on Transportation and Local Government
Wednesday, January 17, 2023

Snow removal is a fact of life in Wisconsin. When municipalities across the state begin to prepare for winter, it is not a question of if, but rather when the snow will fall. Snow plow operations should be as expedient and efficient as possible, allowing the use of new technologies to facilitate enhanced operations.

SB 840 would allow for snow removal vehicles to be equipped with traffic control signal priority devices to communicate with traffic control signals. Snow removal vehicle operators would be able to request green signals, which would allow for snow plows to continue on their route unimpeded. At its core, this bill would ensure a more efficient and effective clearing of the roadway. This bill was introduced and passed unanimously by the Senate in the 2021 Legislative Session.

Maintaining a clear roadway should be a priority for all Wisconsin municipalities, as wintertime roadway conditions are relevant to the safety of Wisconsinites in every corner of the state. This bipartisan, common sense reform will allow roads across the state to be made safer, faster and more efficiently.

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Testimony of Wisconsin Department of Transportation
Assistant Deputy Secretary Joel Nilsestuen
Before the Senate Committee on Transportation and Local Government
January 17, 2024

Re: Senate Bill 840, relating to traffic control sign priority devices for snow removal vehicles.

Thank you, Chairman Tomczyk, and members of the committee for your consideration of the department's input on considering the department's input on Senate Bill Senate Bill 840, relating to traffic control signal priority devices for snow removal vehicles.

This bill authorizes snow removal vehicles to be equipped with lamps or other transmitters to communicate with traffic control signals equipped with traffic control priority devices.

Signal priority is a proven technology that allows equipped vehicles to request or extend a green light at some signalized intersections. Current law allows emergency vehicles to use similar equipment to preempt the traffic signal sequence to provide or extend a green light as they approach an intersection. Signal preemption is different from signal priority in that it immediately changes the timing sequence to provide a green light for the direction of the approaching vehicle. The department also uses signal preemption at signalized intersections near railroad crossings and lift bridges to clear the queue of vehicles that may be in conflict with the train or bridge and then to prevent other vehicles from entering the approach with the tracks or bridge. Signal preemption is an important safety feature at our signalized intersections.

In other states, signal priority has been shown to improve traffic flow on corridors equipped with this technology. One application is for snowplows that are actively engaged in snow removal or anti-icing to receive additional green time or request a green earlier so they can proceed safely and efficiently through the signalized intersection. In our traffic signal controllers, a signal priority request would receive a lower priority for service than a preemption request. Therefore, a vehicle requesting priority would not receive a green light if a vehicle requesting preemption was approaching from a different direction.

Equipping snowplows and traffic signals with signal priority can lead to more efficient removal of snow, quicker travel times on the snowplow route, and reduced usage of Another, more common, application for signal priority is for public transit. If public transit vehicle use was also included in the proposed bill, this would provide for safer, more efficient, and reliable transit service. This technology would provide an overall benefit to our transportation system by reducing unnecessary stops at signalized intersections.

As signal priority is generally installed on mainline highways, all traffic traveling on the mainline benefit from the prioritization. There is little to no impact to side street traffic due to the traffic signal controllers operating within programmed allowances.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.