

## Funding pothole swallows Maine road construction projects



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By The Editorial Board. The BDN Opinion Section operates independently and does not set newsroom policies, or contribute to reporting or editing articles elsewhere in the newspaper or on bangordailynews.com. • May 14, 2019 1:31 pm

As Maine drivers can attest, many of the state's roads are in [bad shape](#). So, it was distressing to learn that the Maine Department of Transportation is [shelving several construction projects](#) this year because they would cost much more than anticipated.

A bid for road and bridge resurfacing on Interstate 295 in the Portland area was rejected because it was more than twice the department's estimate. The department put another 11 projects on hold last week.

"Every project in MaineDOT's plan represents needed work; there are no easy choices," the department said in [a statement](#).

**"Most projects cut from the Construction Advertisement Schedule will be performed in future years, but that is not guaranteed, especially in the case of highway reconstruction and new alignment projects," it added.**

This isn't a one-year bump in the road that will be smoothed by changing economic or political conditions. Rather, it is **a stark warning that, given current resources, Maine can't afford to maintain, let alone improve, its roads and bridges.**

There are many reasons for the higher than expected costs. An increasing amount of transportation construction work is done at night because it is less disruptive to the public. Night work is more expensive in part because workers have to be paid more because the overnight shifts are less attractive.

The state has turned to a thinner mix of materials to repave and repair roads to save money. But fixed costs for construction companies, such as their equipment and labor, don't decrease with the type of paving material they are using.

Most significant, contractors report having to pay higher wages because of the difficulty finding qualified workers, which echoes long-time warnings of Maine's workforce challenges. In the construction business, this is compounded by **a shortage of truck drivers.**

This also is a multifaceted problem. Like the rest of Maine's workforce, many construction workers and truck drivers are nearing the end of their careers and they are not being replaced quickly enough by younger workers. The industry has also been hit by Maine's addiction crisis as some companies **can't find workers** who can meet licensing requirements or pass drug tests. In addition, thousands of men are simply **missing from the workforce.** Efforts are underway to recruit more transportation construction workers, but that work must take on a new urgency if Maine is to keep its roads safe.

"Maine has not done enough to attract, recruit, and train skilled workers in industries we rely on every day," Gov. Janet Mills said in a statement to the Bangor Daily News. "The shortage of construction workers, which is already threatening our ability to repair critical infrastructure, is proof that we cannot wait any longer to act."

"We will continue to encourage Maine people to enter the trades, support education that helps them obtain a credential to do so, and in the long-run, I have charged the Department of Economic and Community Development with devising a long-term plan to solve this crisis and spur economic growth," she added.

Beyond building a bigger workforce, it is clear that the state will have to spend more money each year to address its maintenance backlog and to pay for new construction. **More than 19 percent of the state's bridges are functionally obsolete, and 18 percent of state highway miles are rated poor or unacceptable.**

Yet, combined **state and federal funding falls short of meeting transportation goals set in state statute by more than \$100 million per year,** Transportation Commissioner Bruce Van Note **told lawmakers** earlier this year. **That gap will only grow as projects continue to exceed state cost expectations.**

The Department of Transportation gets the bulk of its funding from three sources: the state highway fund, which is funded largely by state fuel taxes; bonds; and the federal government.

In recent years, state lawmakers and voters have approved **\$100 million bonds annually** for transportation work and the Department of Transportation expects this to continue. This is a critical source of funding, but **borrowed money should not be used for repair projects that may not last as long as the interest payments.**

Some lawmakers, especially Republicans, have suggested devoting more state general fund money to transportation work. This is an important discussion, but consistently devoting more general funds to transportation means less money for other departments or a tax increase to bring in more revenue, both difficult choices.

Although politically unpopular, lawmakers should consider raising the gas tax. The tax, which makes up a substantial portion of the state's highway fund revenue, is now 30 cents per gallon for gasoline and 31 cents per gallon for diesel fuel. This is unchanged since 2011.

These tax rates were adjusted annually for inflation until 2011, when **indexing was repealed**. Now, like federal fuel taxes, the state gas tax is not keeping pace with transportation needs.

**Simply put, Maine needs more money to pay for its transportation needs.** Lawmakers will have to make difficult — and sometimes unpopular — decisions to cover the rising costs of maintaining and improving the state's infrastructure.

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