



BDN EDITORIALS

Here's more evidence that Maine needs to spend more to fix the roads

Rich Beauchesne | The York Weekly | Construction vehicles work on a York Beach connector road, off Route 1 near York's Wild Kingdom, in this September 2018 file photo.

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. • June 27, 2019 12:00 pm | [Click here to view online.](#)

Last month, the Maine Department of Transportation pulled the plug on a dozen construction projects because they were going to cost much more than expected. More recently, a national group ranked Maine the ninth worst state in the country for the condition of its rural roads and seventh for rural bridge conditions.

This is yet more evidence that the state needs to devote more funding to the maintenance and improvement of our transportation infrastructure. Money, of course, isn't the only solution to problems. But, in this case, more money is clearly needed.

[TRIP](#), a national transportation research group, found that **22 percent of Maine's rural roads are rated in poor condition** – the ninth highest rate in the nation – and **21 percent are rated in mediocre condition**. Nationally, 15 percent of rural roads are [rated in poor condition](#) by TRIP.

Fourteen percent of Maine's rural bridges are rated as poor or structurally deficient, compared with 9 percent nationally. Maine has the seventh highest share of deficient bridges in the US.

The group notes that rural roads offer essential connectivity between rural areas and the country's larger communities that are vital to the economic vitality of both. The roads are used to bring goods grown and produced in rural areas to markets and also to bring travelers to rural areas, which are often home to national parks and other recreational spots and dependent on tourism dollars.

The report came less than a month after the Maine Department of Transportation said it 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 month.

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.

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. And as the Legislature's [failure to pass a bond package](#) before adjourning last week shows, relying on an imperfect bonding process to fund this important and continual work is not a safe or sustainable bet. Deputy Transportation Commissioner Nina Fisher told the BDN that the department "can't function" as it needs to in the coming year without the proposed transportation bond of more than \$100 million. It's unfortunate that this needed and popular bond succumbed to timing and political differences at the end of the legislative session. Legislators and the administration should find a way to get it in front of voters this November. "We have to have that bond," Fisher emphasized.

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. With the current legislative session over, policy makers should start now to lay the groundwork for the difficult — and sometimes unpopular — decisions that must be made to cover the rising costs of maintaining and improving the state's infrastructure.

Once again, the DOT is saying the sky is falling whilst \$25 million of state funds are tied up to guarantee the 2018 \$25 million Federal INFRA grant for the construction of the controversial I-395/Rte. 9 connector that Brewer and its citizens do not support. The rest of the \$79.25 million construction cost (\$29.25 million) will come from STIP funds, a source of funds that should have and could have funded a multiple of other projects. Maybe if the DOT was more fiscally responsible, our roads and bridges wouldn't be in such bad shape today; wouldn't 2B-2's funds be better spent on Maine's unmet transportation needs?