

# Portland Press Herald



## Mills calls lawmakers back to put infrastructure bonds on the ballot

The governor scales back her previous request, asking for \$163 million for transportation and broadband projects.

BY [SCOTT THISTLE](#) STAFF WRITER | AUGUST 19, 2019

Gov. Janet Mills is calling Maine lawmakers back to work next Monday so they can vote on a state borrowing package that will be critical to ongoing highway and bridge repair and renovations, expansion of broadband internet connections and other key public services.

Without the borrowing package, which will need to go to voters for approval in November, progress on about [half of the projects on the Maine Department of Transportation's work list](#) would be halted or stalled indefinitely, transportation officials have said.

The proposed package released by Mills on Monday includes some \$163 million in borrowing, which is \$76 million less than a proposal that the Legislature did not act on this summer.

Mills' new package includes funding for transportation projects, rural broadband expansion and land conservation, among other things.

"This revised proposal is a fair compromise that should garner bipartisan support in the Legislature," Mills said in a prepared statement. "I am asking lawmakers to take advantage of low interest rates, pass these critical bonds and send them to Maine voters for their consideration this November."

For the bonding proposals to make it on the ballot for the November election, the legislation would have to be completed by Aug. 30, state officials have said.

Sen. Dana Dow, R-Waldoboro, said there was broad agreement between Republicans and Democrats on \$105 million in transportation bonds and that a scaled-down package may be more palatable to Republicans, but he had yet to

meet with other State House leaders or his caucus specifically and had yet to see details of the proposal.

To pass the Legislature, the borrowing package needs two-thirds support in both the House and the Senate, under the state's constitution.

Mills detailed her proposal Monday, with \$105 million for transportation, \$15 million for broadband internet expansion, \$4 million for the state's career and technical education centers, \$4 million for Maine National Guard facilities, \$5 million each for wastewater infrastructure, hazardous materials cleanup, and weatherization and energy efficiency funds.

The proposal also includes \$20 million for the Land for Maine's Future land conservation program.

Most of the borrowing proposals will, if approved by lawmakers and voters, also draw down matching local and federal funds. The transportation funds, for example, are expected to draw down as much as \$137 million in federal matching funds.

Dow also said he believed there are tentative plans for separate votes on each of the four proposals to borrow funds. This was a key sticking point during the last legislative session, when Democrats wanted to vote on the entire package of bonding proposals in one measure.

Dow said talks have largely been informal, but lawmakers have been anticipating being called back to work on the borrowing package since the legislative session adjourned earlier this summer.

"I haven't had a chance to sit down with leadership, we haven't sat down to hammer out anything, so we got to wait and see, I guess," Dow said.

In June, Mills proposed borrowing [\\$239 million](#) over two years for economic development, environment and transportation programs. That proposal included a \$105 million bond to fund work on highways, ports, rail and airports next year.

Mills' proposed bond package, which was endorsed by the Legislature's budget-writing committee, included \$105 million for road, bridge and infrastructure repair; \$50 million for research and development, expanding broadband and fishing/farming infrastructure; \$65 million for wastewater treatment projects, renewable energy and the Land for Maine's Future program; and \$19 million for career and technical education or child care.

Republicans insisted they wanted separate votes on each of the four packages and not a single bill with all of the borrowing included. They said they were concerned that the state was taking on too much debt, after passing a two-year budget of close to \$8 billion. Lawmakers were unable to reach an agreement on the borrowing plan before the legislative session ended.

Once the Legislature is back in formal session, lawmakers could take up additional bills, but Democratic leaders have said they intend to keep the session focused exclusively on the borrowing packages.

Dow said Monday that end-of-session negotiations around borrowing never really got serious because most in the Legislature believed they would be called back this summer to work things out.

Democratic leaders said in prepared statements that they intend to support all of Mills' new borrowing package.

Senate President Troy Jackson, D-Allagash, said ultimately it would be up to Maine voters to approve the measures.

"To me, the question is simple: do you support giving Maine voters a voice or not?" Jackson asked. "I will proudly be voting to approve each of these bonds and I hope my colleagues in the Legislature will join me."

House Speaker Sara Gideon, D-Freeport, said the package was an investment in Maine's future.

"Securing needed investments in broadband expansion, conservation and environmental protection will help drive Maine forward and help determine our economic success," Gideon said.

State Treasurer Henry Beck, also a Democrat, said borrowing for the state now made sense as interest rates remained at an historic low.

Mills also noted that the current state budget, signed into law in June, includes enough money to service up to an additional \$300 million in debt.

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