

Bangor Daily News

Statewide edition

BDN bangordailynews.com

Thursday, August 15, 2019 \$1.25

No deal yet on bonds as Maine lawmakers face key deadline for road funding

By [Michael Shepherd](#), BDN Staff • August 15, 2019

AUGUSTA, Maine — Maine lawmakers are mulling a bond package that could be at least \$70 million smaller than one proposed by Gov. Janet Mills two weeks from a deadline to put crucial transportation borrowing on the November ballot.

Democrats who lead the Legislature [deadlocked with minority Republicans](#) on a \$239 million package from Mills before the legislative session's June end, but an end-of-month deadline to get the widely supported transportation bond on the ballot could bring them back to Augusta.

[Maine relies on borrowing](#) to fund infrastructure. Voters have approved transportation bonds in four consecutive years, and [the Maine Department of Transportation's work plan](#) assumes roughly \$100 million in annual borrowing matched by federal money to fill a funding gap.

Transportation Commissioner Bruce Van Note said his agency would be in “a world of hurt” ahead of the 2020 construction season if it does not get the bond, saying it would risk half of a \$350 million fund largely dedicated to bridge replacements, road construction and paving. Still, he was optimistic legislators would strike a deal.

“Even though it’s unsettling and it’s a little bit scary, I fully expect they’re going to do it because they have in recent years,” Van Note said.

The Democratic governor [proposed her bond package in June](#), slating \$189 million in borrowing for the 2019 election and \$50 million for 2020. It was centered on \$105 million for transportation and more for conservation, broadband, economic development and other infrastructure.

It would go to voters as four different questions, but Mills presented it as one package since Republicans — who could withhold necessary two-thirds votes in both chambers required to send bond proposals to the ballot — would spike certain items if popular transportation funding was considered separately.

Republicans voted against the whole package in July, saying they wanted to vote on items separately. [House Democrats spiked a Republican bid](#) to approve the transportation bond alone. Negotiating has gone on behind the scenes since then.

On Wednesday, legislative leaders were considering a framework from Senate President Troy Jackson, D-Allagash, slimming the package to \$169 million leaving transportation at the same mark as it was, but lowering funding in other areas. Jackson spokeswoman Christine Kirby said that did not constitute a firm proposal and was meant to gauge negotiations.

Little has changed for House Minority Leader Kathleen Dillingham, R-Oxford, who said a majority of her caucus would support a transportation bond but made no guarantees on other items.

“The caucus is of a mind, all of us together, that if they are all bundled together, they will not have the support of the House Republicans,” she said.

Sen. Bill Diamond, D-Windham, a moderate dealmaker and co-chair of the Legislature’s transportation committee, said Wednesday he was optimistic about a deal and expected something resembling Jackson’s pared-down framework to be presented separately to lawmakers upon a return to Augusta in two weeks.

“I know what a deadline does, and it’s always good to have one,” he said.

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Is this really the best way to fund transportation programs?”

— BRUCE VAN NOTE

Commissioner, Maine Department of Transportation

[Portland Press Herald 8.14.2019](#)

NO, bonds are not free!! Last year’s bond will cost Mainers \$29 million over the next 10 years until the bond matures. This article claims that Mainers have voted approval of transportation bonds for the last consecutive 4 years – that’s \$116 million that will be owed in interest payments. Think before you vote...