

# A better way to fund road repair?

## State commission will look for it

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Author: Don Carrigan | September 11, 2019

WINDHAM, Maine — Traffic is typically heavy on Route 302 in North Windham. Cars and trucks roar through the busy shopping area between the Sebago Lake region and Portland.

Sen. Bill Diamond stands in front of his business office, and talks about why Maine needs to find better ways to pay for those roads.

"I'm convinced we have a problem. I'm not convinced a lot of other people are," Sen. Diamond says.

Diamond is co-chairman of a new state commission, formed by the Legislature, that will start work next week. Its job is to determine if Maine's current method of paying for road and bridge repair is working and, if not, recommend changes.

The Maine Department of Transportation says its current budget is about \$130 million short each year of meeting the needs for road and bridge repair. The biggest share of that money comes from the 30 cent per gallon gasoline tax, paid by drivers, with another \$100 million a year coming from borrowing through bonds passed by voters.

But increasing popularity of electric cars is a threat to the gas tax, and legislators say borrowing large amounts each year isn't good, either.

Diamond, a Democrat, says the gasoline tax cannot be raised enough to replace the annual borrowing.

"A penny on the gas tax generates \$7 million," says Diamond. "Imagine what it would take to make that kind of total. So whatever options we look at there is no one of them that will solve the problem."

And GOP Sen. Brad Farrin, R-Norridgewock, who is also a member of the commission, says they need to look at all the choices, and not just try to raise the gas tax.

"Some folks think the easy answer is just to raise the gas tax and representing rural Maine, a gas tax hits us pretty hard because we have to drive further," Farrin says.

Diamond says the first step will be to find out if all members of the commission agree on the need for a new funding method. Beyond that, the senators say all options should be on the table.

They say those could include ideas like expanding tolls to other roads besides the turnpike, taxing vehicle miles driven or even shifting money from other taxes, such as sales taxes on motor vehicles, into the highway fund.

That commission holds its first meeting next week, and is expected to look at what ideas are working in other rural states with a similar number of roads. But that would likely not include New Hampshire. The MDOT says Maine has nearly three times the state road mileage of New Hampshire.

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Remember, all of this is happening at the same time that the MaineDOT has managed to squirrel away \$79.25 million of our limited state/federal transportation funds to construct the controversial I-395/Rte. 9 Connector (a.k.a. 2B-2). The Brewer City Council unanimously resolved non-support of this project by choosing the NO-build alternative in January 2012.

WE vehemently question this large of an expenditure on one single project, especially a project that does not satisfy the original study purpose and needs as established by state and federal transportation professionals in 2000. **The system linkage need criteria—for the study's first decade—was to provide a DIRECT connection from I-395 to Route 9 EAST of Route 46 at or near the Eddington/Clifton border.**

Yes, we do need money to fix our roads and bridges, but spending money on a road that we do not want (or need) is fiscally irresponsible. That \$79.25 million would be better spent on Maine's well documented unmet transportation needs.