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OUR VIEW

Bond package puts Maine further behind

Republicans cost Maine a chance to weigh investments in projects voters care about.

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If Maine voters approve the bond now on the ballot in November, the state will spend \$105 million – and continue to fall behind on necessary investments.

It's not just that the money, earmarked for transportation projects, is insufficient to keep up with road and bridge repair, or that the whole system for funding these projects is [in need of an overhaul](#).

More than that, the problem with the bond package is that it leaves so much on the table.

Maine has an undeniable need for public investment as well as the capacity. But because of [Republican opposition](#), voters won't get a chance to weigh in on items that enjoy widespread support, and for good reason – land conservation, vocational training and high-speed internet expansion are important to Maine's future.

Votes from Republican legislators at the State House on Monday kept off the ballot \$58 million in additional bond spending proposed by Gov. Mills. The proposal was down from the \$239 million package the governor [put forth in June](#).

Republican leaders said Monday that legislators should wait and consider the additional borrowing in January, when they'll have a better idea of how the two-year budget that began in July is performing.

But waiting is the problem. Maine failed to keep up on its investments during the administration of then-Gov. Paul LePage. Infrastructure has worn down. Broadband expansion – crucial to the business interests of rural Maine and supposedly a bipartisan priority – is in [desperate need of public funding](#). The popular [Land for Maine's Future](#) program, which conserves waterfront for the fishing industry, farmland for farmers and open space for everybody, has not been replenished since 2012.

The spending cast aside by Republicans will have to happen at some point. If funding from Land for Maine's Future is not available, Maine will lose out on important conservation projects. When it comes to broadband expansion, state money is necessary to attract private and federal funds, and improve the ability to live and do business in every corner of the state. Career and technical centers are critical to training workers and raising incomes.

Maine's debt and debt spending are [low compared to its budget](#). Interest rates are low, but could rise between now and next year, costing Maine taxpayers millions of dollars in extra interest payments.

Despite the dangers of holding off on these important investments, both in lost opportunities and increased interest, Republican leaders tried to cast their votes as protective of taxpayers. "Today, we did have the votes to stop them from adding to their irresponsible spending spree," Assistant House Minority Leader Trey Stewart said, referencing the \$8 billion two-year state budget passed earlier this year by the Democratic-controlled Legislature.

However, a \$300 million bond package is already baked into the budget. The \$163 million on the table this week would not have raised the budget one cent, nor would have the \$239 million package originally proposed by Gov. Mills, most of which would have gone on the November ballot.

The earlier, bigger proposal included substantial investments in clean energy, land conservation, broadband expansion and workforce development – all important to achieving shared prosperity across the state.

Had it been approved, the large bond package would have had a good chance with voters, not because they love spending but because Maine residents have always backed smart investments that protect the things they care about.

Voters would have looked well upon Gov. Mills' second, lesser proposal too.

But instead they'll only be able to vote on the same, insufficient transportation bond that's been put forward the last four years – and watch as Maine falls further behind.