

Portland Press Herald



State panel gets rolling on effort to solve highway funding shortfall

The independent commission will look into ways to overcome the state's \$140 million yearly funding gap for roads and bridges.

By [Peter McGuire](#) | Staff Writer | 9.16.2019

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The co-chair of a blue ribbon commission charged with reforming the state's chronic highway funding shortfall pledged that the group will consider all options to reduce the state's reliance on annual transportation bonds.

The 15-member panel is scheduled to hold its first meeting in Augusta on Tuesday. Made up of lawmakers from both parties, private and nonprofit interests, the commission is tasked with examining and proposing ways to bridge a \$140 million annual gap between the highway budget and what the Maine Department of Transportation says it needs maintain the state's roads and bridges. Maine [borrows annually](#) to shore up its \$393 million yearly highway budget.

"The point of the commission is to do two things," said commission co-chairman Rep. Andrew McLean, D-Gorham. "One, to provide education to the public and stakeholders about the need for more transportation funding, and two, to come up with any solutions we think are viable."

Related: [Transportation bond continues practice of shoring up budget shortfalls](#)

The commission is expected to draft a report of its findings and recommendations by December. It may also draft a bill addressing issues for lawmakers to consider when the Legislature reconvenes in January.

"It's really not that complicated of an issue," McLean added. "Everyone who drives over roads and bridges knows the conditions of them are poor. What do we need to do? We simply need to spend more money on road infrastructure."

Lawmakers, including McLean, have for years [proposed ways](#) to reform the state's highway fund, used to pay for repair and maintenance of the state's sprawling network of roads and bridges. The state's 30-cent a gallon gasoline tax is the fund's primary funding source, but it hasn't increased in years and some worry it won't keep pace as vehicles with more fuel-efficient engines and electric vehicles take to the road.

Related: [Maine lawmakers consider raising fuel tax to boost road, bridge repairs](#)

Commissioners will consider a range of options, including a gas tax increase, directing vehicle sales tax to the highway fund, proposing fees on hybrid and electric vehicles, a pilot program that would charge a fee on the number of miles driven, new highway tolling, and sharing highway funding between residents and non-residents.

"We are going to take everything into account, there is nothing that is off the table, there is nothing that is on the table," McLean said.

The commission, formally named the Blue Ribbon Commission to Study and Recommend Funding Solutions for the State's Transportation Systems, includes Republican and Democrat lawmakers, representatives from private trucking, construction and rail companies, a town manager, public transportation and bicycling advocates and the heads of the Maine Department of Transportation and the Maine Turnpike Authority.

Commissioners are supposed to meet up to six times over the four months, including at least three meetings in locations around the state to take public comments. Knowledgeable stakeholders will be given an opportunity to submit written testimony.

Taking the discussion out of the halls of the State House may insulate it from political partisanship and disinterest that doomed earlier attempts to fix the highway fund, said Sen. Matt Pouliot, R-Augusta, one of the commissioners.

Related: [Climbing costs drive state to pass up 12 more road and bridge projects](#)

"I think the time is long past for us to identify and actually commit to long-term and sustainable funding solutions to transportation infrastructure in our state," Pouliot said.

This is the first time in at least a decade the state has taken a hard look at how it funds transportation infrastructure. At least 27 states and the District of Columbia have increased gas taxes and added funding sources since 2013,

according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Maine's tax last increased in 2011, but it is no longer indexed to rise with inflation.

Maine Department of Transportation was forced this year to cancel [\\$59 million in road and bridge work](#) because it could not afford high construction prices. State transportation planners also worried about [project timing](#) when a crucial \$105 million bond was held up in Augusta last month, not the first time that bond complications threatened Maine's road program.

Maria Fuentes, executive director of the Maine Better Transportation Association, said the commission offers hope things will change after years of inaction from Democratic and Republican administrations.

"Anything we can do to raise awareness and have the public better understand what we are facing is a good thing," she said. "Then there will be a better shot at making something happen for some funding that is a little more sustainable than what we have now."

Related: [Climbing costs drive state to pass up 12 more road and bridge projects](#)

-End of PPH article-

In two failed efforts to legislate the 2B-2 alternative out of consideration for the I-395/Route 9 Connector project, I provided hundreds of pages of MaineDOT's own documentation in written and oral testimony that demonstrated—in DOT's own words—2B-2 was a questionable selection for a \$79.25 million project:

See [LD47 Testimony](#) and [LD783 Testimony](#).

2B-2 does not satisfy the study's original purpose and needs, specifically the system linkage need criteria:

*"Prior to the eleventh PAC meeting on February 20, 2002, the system linkage need was examined in greater detail to further aid in reducing the number of preliminary alternatives. To meet the need of improved regional system linkage while minimizing impacts to people, it was determined that **an alternative must provide a limited-access connection between I-395 and Route 9 east of Route 46.**"* [October 2003 MaineDOT/FHWA Technical Memorandum - page 5](#)

The DOT also made disparaging statements in 2003 that any route to the west of Route 46 would negatively impact the local communities:

“Alternatives that do not provide a limited access connection to Route 9 east of Route 46 would not be practicable because that would not provide a substantial improvement in regional mobility and connectivity and would negatively affect people living along Route 9 in the study area.”

“Alternatives that would connect to Route 9 west of Route 46 would severely impact local communities along Route 9 between proposed alternative connection points and Route 46.”

[October 2003 MaineDOT/FHWA Technical Memorandum - page 5](#)

How can anyone have a discussion about not having money to repair our roads and bridges when the DOT is being allowed to squirrel away \$79.25 million for a project that the Brewer City Council has resolved non-support in at least three times since January 2012?

One of those [projects that had to be passed on this past year](#) was the Wilson Street/I-395 Bridge in Brewer, an \$11.9 million project that is essentially the first phase of the connector project—this bridge would not need to be replaced if it wasn't for the connector project and specifically the selection of 2B-2 as the preferred alternative.

Yes, this is a much needed commission, but I doubt anything constructive will come out of it; it doesn't matter where it is being held as politics will be always be front and center.

So, please don't put much faith in the process, as it hasn't helped us so far...

Do we need \$79.25 million right now? Cancel the connector project!!!!