

## Our View: Recurring need to borrow shows trouble with Maine's roads and bridges

By The Editorial Board June 9, 2019

Another state budget cycle, another [proposed \\$100 million transportation bond](#). And if this year is anything like previous ones, this bill will face little opposition, either from the Legislature or from the voters in November.

And why should this year be different? Our roads and bridges are in bad shape and the money we collect from their users through the gas tax doesn't come close to paying to keep them usable. The public hates potholes and detours, and politicians want to be on the side of prudent infrastructure investment that's going to pay off in the long run through economic development.

But the main reason this will sail through without any controversy is that we've become so used to pouring borrowed money into a system that doesn't work that it seems normal to us. But this is not normal.

This bond issue is necessary because the budget for maintaining our roads and bridges comes up short – not just once in a while and not by a little, but every year and by a lot. The first transportation bond issue of more than \$100 million was approved in 2007, at the start of the Great Recession, and \$100 million bonds have since passed in 2013, 2016 and [2018](#). Before this run, the biggest transportation bond was \$63 million in 2003, and most were in the same range as the [\\$12 million](#) the state borrowed in 1968 (which would be \$37.9 million in today's dollars).

Some of these funds go to airports and rail infrastructure, but the bulk of the budget is spent on roads and bridges.

The rise in borrowing tracks with the inability of gas tax revenues to keep up with costs. Rates are frozen on both the state and federal levels at 30 cents per gallon and 18 cents respectively. As vehicle mileage improves and electric

vehicles become more common, there is less gas sold per mile driven. Efforts to increase the gas tax and charge electric vehicles for their use of the roads were a political nonstarter in Augusta last session. Gas taxes are regressive, hitting the people who can least afford to pay the hardest, and penalizing electric cars would discourage their use when they are beneficial for other reasons. That left bonding as the best option for lawmakers.

It's easy to see how we wound up here, but it's harder to understand why everyone accepts it. Imagine if the voters were asked to approve borrowing to pay the salaries of teachers or game wardens – not once, after a catastrophic event, but every two years. We would all recognize that we were looking at a system in trouble.

In this case, we've got more roads than we can afford to maintain, but we have no choice because there are few alternative available for most people. So we keep borrowing, and what we spend on debt service is only part of the problem.

Transportation is the No. 1 cause of [greenhouse-gas emissions](#) in Maine, and the road system that we can't afford has driven a style of development that makes people more dependent on personal vehicles to get where they need to go. Pumping another \$100 million into the status quo means we continue to subsidize our contribution to global warming.

We will never meet the ambitious [climate goals set by Gov. Mills](#) if we don't start thinking differently about transportation, and that will take different thinking about more than just roads.

We need to rethink land-use planning, housing and make moving people from place to place without burning fossil fuels a priority in infrastructure investment.

This system that runs on gasoline and borrowed money is trying to tell us something. What once seemed like good ideas are no longer working.

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