

Maine is working to increase road funding and reduce emissions. Politics are keeping them separate.



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Construction crews work in Bangor in this 2018 file photo. Maine's is pursuing parallel efforts to increase transportation funding and reduce carbon emissions, but they encompass a number of tricky political questions.

By [Caitlin Andrews](#), BDN Staff • December 24, 2019 6:00 am

AUGUSTA, Maine — How Maine weighs in on a regional effort to curb transportation emissions could have consequences for parallel efforts to increase funding for roads and bridges and reduce carbon emissions generally, according to elected officials.

That makes the conversation around the [Transportation Climate Initiative](#) — a regional cap-and-trade plan from Northeast states that aims to drive down emissions — delicate in Maine, a rural state where [roughly half of carbon emissions](#) come from vehicles and public transit is less developed than the rest of the region.

The administration of Democratic Gov. Janet Mills is participating in that effort, but it hasn't committed to supporting it as a state commission considers ways to fill an [annual shortfall for road and bridge maintenance that the Maine Department of Transportation has estimated at \\$232 million.](#)

Both are politically complicated, but a gas tax is sensitive. It hasn't increased since 2011, and Republicans won't go for a gas tax unless it's tied to a constitutional amendment to eliminate bonding except for emergencies, said Sen. Matthew Pouliot, R-Augusta, who sits on the blue-ribbon transportation commission.

Sen. Bill Diamond, D-Windham, who also sits on the commission, said any perception that the commission's work and the initiative are tied together would be a “death knell” for any proposal the commission recommends and saying the conversations should remain separate.

“It would be a nonstarter and kill any discussion along those lines,” he said.

Diamond said the conversation around climate change and transportation funding should remain separate. He said the commission has just barely been able to discuss the idea of a single-digit gas tax increase. (A month ago, Pouliot said Republicans [simply wouldn't support a gas tax increase.](#))

Diamond added that the gas tax increase required by the initiative could be much higher, saying they could be between 20 to 30 cents. [According to Maine Public](#), drivers could see a 5 to 17-cents per gallon increase in the initiative's first year, depending on emission targets.

"It would be politically naive to think this could go forward at the same time," Diamond said, referring to the initiative, noting the Transportation Climate Initiative looks at reducing fossil fuels from a climate change perspective.

The governor has tasked a new Maine Climate Council with [making the state carbon-neutral by 2045](#) and that effort includes a subgroup on transportation. However, it hasn't discussed the transportation initiative in depth yet, said state Rep. Bettyann Sheats, D-Auburn, instead focusing on the bigger picture of how people travel themselves around the state and how to create the "biggest impact" with the least amount of controversy and cost.

That has meant looking at barriers to more efficient vehicles — like the cost of electric vehicle charging ports and fears of electric vehicles running out of power mid-commute — and public transportation, Sheats said. Cost is part of the conversation, but how anything gets funded is the purview of the commission, she said.

"At this point we're trying to figure out what's the best bang for our buck," she said of the climate council's group.

The Transportation Climate Initiative would reduce the amount of carbon emissions allowed from transportation fuels — which make up 50 percent of the state's emissions — by limiting how much emissions can come from transportation and require dealers to bid for allowances to sell fuel within that cap and send the proceeds to participating states.

A [memorandum of understanding](#) between the partnering states was released last week, but Mills, a Democrat, hasn't said yet whether she will sign on. Mills spokesperson Lindsay Crete said the state will be "appropriately cautious" when considering how the state's rural nature and transportation needs intersect with climate change.

Pouliot said it would be a "huge win" for the state if they could eliminate bonding for transportation, but he said there needs to be more communication from the state on where they are with the Transportation Climate Initiative, saying there is "a lot of concern" about what would happen to the gas tax if it was approved and the Legislature increased the gas tax.

If a hike occurred, he said it should only increase over time and fluctuate depending on the state's needs. But Pouliot noted any solution is going to face political barriers, noting rearranging general fund money would come with its own obstacles.

"How do you fill the gap without generating the revenue?" he asked. "You don't."

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