

## Short-term patches can't pave over Maine's transportation funding shortfall



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By The Editorial Board.  
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Over the next three years, the Maine Department of Transportation will upgrade and maintain **fewer roads and bridges** while spending more money to do so. This is because, while construction costs are increasing, state funding to pay for this work hasn't kept pace with the need.

The state's annual road and bridge funding shortfall — the gap between what the department says it needs to spend to maintain the system and the amount of money it expects to have available to fund this work — now stands at \$233 million. And this assumes that voters will approve about \$100 million in borrowing for transportation projects each year.

As a result of this shortfall, the department will essentially spread out what would be two years worth of work over three years. The department will also do more temporary patch work in place of more substantial rebuilds. Nearly 150 projects were removed from the three-year project list.

Even with this corner cutting, the three-year plan costs \$150 million more than the previous one because construction costs have risen sharply. Contractors report having to **pay higher wages** because of the difficulty finding qualified workers, which echoes long-time warnings of Maine's workforce challenges. In the construction business, this is compounded by **a shortage of truck drivers**.

**"Even with these efforts, the fiscal reality is that we are now competently managing a slow decline of our transportation system until bipartisan funding solutions materialize,"** Transportation Commissioner Bruce Van Note wrote in **a letter** that accompanied the three-year work plan. **"The system will not fail immediately, and we will do our best to avoid any serious safety impacts. But holding actions only work for a short time, and the reliability of the system will suffer."**

The pared-back transportation work plan for the next three years, which was previewed by the department's announcement last year that it had **scrapped 11 projects** for the 2019 list because of a shortage of funding and rising construction costs, is a huge red flag warning lawmakers that they must find additional ways to pay for this needed work.

Lawmakers can't ignore it. A committee tasked with examining transportation funding has asked for additional time to complete its work. Its job was made much more difficult last year when Republican members suggested that increasing the state's gas tax shouldn't be among the task force's recommended solutions.

This is counterproductive. Certainly the gas tax is not a panacea, but it should be among the solutions.

The gas tax, which accounts for 69 percent of the state's highway fund revenue, is now 30 cents per gallon for gasoline and 31 cents per gallon for diesel fuel. This is unchanged since 2011, when the Republican-controlled Legislature ended the practice of automatically indexing the gas tax to inflation.

According to the Department of Transportation, a 1-cent increase to the gas tax would generate **\$7.5 million in revenue**. The trucking industry, which would bear much of the cost of a higher fuel tax, **supports** a 15- to 20-cent increase. This would provide significant and much-needed revenue.

Other potential revenue sources include new tolls, levies on electric and hybrid vehicles, and dedicating a portion of sales tax revenue to transportation — all of which should be on the table.

Gas taxes and tolls have the benefit of tying funding to usage of roads and bridges. Taking money from the state's general fund, on the other hand, pits human services, education and other government priorities against transportation funding. This, too, is a discussion worth having, but it is unlikely to resolve the immediate funding problems that the Department of Transportation is facing.

The Transportation Department's work plan makes it clear that the shortfall in funding for road and bridge work has serious consequences and is getting worse. Lawmakers must propose realistic funding solutions to bridge the gap, and they need to do it soon.

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**Again, no mention of why—in such “dour” times—no one sees a problem in cutting 142 projects at the same time the DOT is bidding this spring the \$13.5 million Wilson Street bridge replacement that is only needed in support of the \$100 million I-395/Route 9 connector project that many do not support...**

**What's wrong with you—Maine is out of money!!**