



Maine Transportation Department Unveils \$2.6 Billion, 3-Year Work Plan

By STEVE MISTLER | 1.14.2020 | [Click here to view online.](#)



I-295 northbound in Portland in 2011. MAINE PUBLIC/FILE

The Maine Department of Transportation released a three-year work plan that includes more than 2,000 projects worth nearly \$2.6 billion. It also contains something else: a plea to state lawmakers to help the department fill a project backlog spurred by higher construction costs, workforce shortages and chronic underfunding.

The cry for more money is nothing new, but it's increasingly desperate as MDOT officials issue dire warnings of a slow march toward a system failure.

The driveway and parking at Maine DOT's north Augusta facility is pocked with potholes, some temporarily patched up but deteriorating, and at least one large enough to bottom-out a small car. It was a fitting venue for Tuesday's press conference, in which Maine DOT Commissioner Bruce Van Note repeatedly emphasized a message that's woven throughout [the agency's new, 280-page work plan.](#)

“I’m not one for hyperbole and I’m not one to use the word ‘crisis.’ It’s just not how I’m wired. We’re engineers by nature. We just address what we have, but this level of funding is not sustainable,” he says.

Sustainable funding for Maine’s sprawling network of state highways, bridges, railways and ports has been an issue for years. It’s been exacerbated by a combination of State House politics and challenges brought by newer, fuel efficient and electric cars [that have diminished the gas tax revenues](#) that help fund Maine’s transportation system.

The MDOT has pressed for more federal one-time grants, and Maine voters [have approved hundreds of millions of dollars](#) in transportation bonds.

Van Note says it’s still not enough.

“Maine DOT is essentially a great machine that knows how to produce good work at a good price, but we are running low on fuel,” he says.

The department’s three-year work plan spends \$150 million more than its predecessor, but on 142 fewer projects. And some of those projects are like the pothole patches in its own north Augusta parking lot — temporary solutions that are labeled as such in the work plan.

“Here are the titles: Light capital paving. Ultra-thin wearing surface. What are we doing? We’re taking that peanut butter pavement and spreading it as thin as we can to get as many miles going to hold it together,” Van Note says.

He describes the work plan as managing a slow decline in Maine’s transportation system.

It contains 148 bridge projects and 171 miles of highway construction and rehabilitation as well as funding for other projects.

But it also relies on an uncertainty: \$300 million in bonding over the next three years that must first be approved by the Legislature and, then, Maine voters.

And even if that bonding occurs the work plan has a \$230 million project shortfall.

[A special transportation task force has proposed adding taxes and fees](#), which are unpopular with some lawmakers.

Paul Koziell, president of CPM Construction in Freeport, served on the task force and says he doesn't understand that position.

"Many of these same folks fail to appreciate the urgency and immediacy of this problem and do not have the political courage to take the necessary steps to resolve this funding shortfall," he says.

Maine isn't the only state confronting the transportation funding problem, but other states have moved faster to address it.

Since 2013, 27 states have increased gas taxes or added long-term funding sources, [according to a database](#) published by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Maine's last gas tax increase was in 2011, the same year the Republican-controlled Legislature eliminated the indexing that hikes the tax with inflation.

The prospect of an increase during an election year appears unlikely, leaving Van Note calling for what he describes as a "nonpartisan solution."