

# Portland Press Herald

## Maine highway work scaled back amid budget crunch

The state's three-year highway construction plan costs \$2.6 billion, but has fewer projects than in previous years.

BY **PETER MCGUIRE** STAFF WRITER | [CLICK HERE TO VIEW ONLINE.](#)

Maine's newest multi-year highway construction plan turns a common maxim on its head – **the state now plans to do less with more.**

**At \$2.6 billion, the three-year Department of Transportation work plan is 13 percent more expensive than three years ago, but will accomplish less.**

Officials say a chronic budget shortfall and **high construction prices** forced the department to reduce the number of expensive bridge projects and substitute durable restoration with short-term repairs on hundreds of miles of state roads.

"The reality is we are now competently managing a slow decline of our transportation system until bipartisan funding solutions materialize," said state Transportation Commissioner Bruce Van Note at an Augusta press conference Tuesday. **"The system will not fail immediately, and we will do our best to avoid any serious impacts, but holding actions only work for a short time, and the reliability of the system will suffer."**

The proposed work plan runs through 2022 and includes the construction of dozens of bridges and more than 170 miles of highway construction and rehabilitation.

But the department also has increased the miles slated for light capital paving – also called "skinny mix," a thin layer of pavement to temporarily hold together broken roads.

Thin paving is planned for about 1,800 miles of state roads by 2022 – one-fifth of Maine's state highways – at a cost of \$76 million, but maintaining that production could be at risk without additional highway funding, the department said in its plan.

Some heavily traveled, top-priority roads aren't scheduled for even light paving. Instead, the department intends temporary patches to keep traffic moving safely, said Andy Bickmore, director of MDOT's Results and Information Office.

"We're trying to keep good roads good and isolate the bad ones," he said.

Maine plans on less bridge work over the next three years, but 148 planned projects still will cost \$545 million, one-fifth of the entire spending proposal. Those projects include an \$84.6 million replacement of the International Bridge in Madawaska, and replacements of highway bridges in Portland, Yarmouth and Falmouth.

Competitive federal grants partially pay for some of the bridges. Although that gives the state additional funding for expensive projects, it also means Maine has to match spending and follow grant rules, which means less flexibility in an already tight budget, Bickmore said.