

Gridlocked Maine panel could punt transportation funding fix to 2021 — or to voters



Michael Shepherd | BDN
Maine Transportation Commissioner
Bruce Van Note speaks at a news conference in Augusta on Tuesday, Jan. 14, 2020, alongside (from left to right) Madawaska Town Manager Gary Picard, Paul Kosiell, president of CPM Constructors, Inc. in Freeport and Dana Connors, the CEO of the Maine State Chamber of Commerce.

By [Caitlin Andrews](#), BDN Staff • February 11, 2020

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AUGUSTA, Maine — A commission looking to solve Maine’s persistent transportation funding shortfall broke down in a messy Tuesday hearing over budget transfers and a gas tax increase, with some frustrated members saying it should punt its work to 2021 — or to voters.

The Maine Legislature and Gov. Janet Mills formed the blue-ribbon commission that has been tasked with bridging the shortfall for road and bridge maintenance, which is [estimated at \\$232 million annually](#) even with [\\$100 million in annual, voter-approved borrowing](#) factored in.

Members of the bipartisan commission, which includes trucking and construction interests, have agreed on a goal of finding \$160 million more a year for the system that with the idea that federal dollars would make up the rest. They have not firmly agreed on much else.

It has looked likely that any proposed solution would include transfers from the state budget along with an increase in the gas tax, the dominant funding source for Maine’s highway budget. In recent years, [Democrats have favored a gas-tax hike](#) while Republicans generally want to transfer money from the state budget to the separate transportation fund.

That seems to have broken down after last week. [Republicans are frustrated](#) the Democratic governor put only [\\$10 million in a spending proposal released last](#)

month that they felt hamstrung their ability to negotiate for more of the state's \$116 million surplus.

Sen. Matthew Pouliot, R-Augusta, said he's not interested in a gas tax increase now and supported taking \$160 million from vehicle sales tax revenue, though a straw poll of the commission showed he was the only one on it who wouldn't support a gas tax increase.

At the same time, Sen. Brad Farrin, R-Norridgewock, and Rep. Tom Martin, R-Greene, said they would support a solution including an increase. Farrin said Republican opposition to that "concerned" him and noted it would partially affect seasonal visitors.

Transportation Commissioner Bruce Van Note said he wished Mills "hadn't put in anything" her spending plan for transportation because the \$10 million "couldn't be conflated" by Republicans. He said the money should be seen as buy-in from Mills for future spending, not an end number.

At one point, Sen. Bill Diamond, D-Windham, the commission's co-chair, suggested punting a solution to next year after the 2020 election. The breakdown frustrated industry members of the commission. Paul Koziell, the president of Freeport-based CPM Constructors Inc., said a solution would never come if it didn't happen this year.

"There's no excuse for this commission to come up with a bipartisan solution; there just isn't," Koziell said.

Other members are staying the course on a mixed solution but differ on timelines. Members seemed to identify a 9-cent increase in the gas tax — which would generate roughly \$ 67.5 million a year once in place — as a target.

The same goes for how much state budget money would be transferred. Diamond suggested \$60 million over three years, while his House counterpart, Rep. Andrew McLean, D-Gorham, suggested ramping to \$75 million over three years. Some included other, smaller measures including special fees for electric vehicles and tax rebates for low-income Mainers.

It looks unlikely that the commission will have a consensus solution for the Legislature to consider in 2020. They are expected to meet once more to discuss the issue in March, but Peter Mills, the executive director of the Maine Turnpike Authority and the governor's brother, suggested putting a solution to voters in November if the commission cannot agree.

"Admit the Legislature is dysfunctional on this topic and get it out of here," he said.