

Aroostook County is getting the biggest chunk of Maine's 2020 road budget



Morgan Mitchell | BDN

This image from December 2018 captures the view looking down Bridge Avenue in Madawaska toward the international bridge to Edmundston, New Brunswick.

By [Alexander MacDougall](#) • March 8, 2020

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HOULTON, Maine — Road projects in Aroostook County will have the highest estimated cost of any county in the state this year, according to data obtained from the Maine Department of Transportation.

Projects around The County will cost approximately \$135 million as part of the Transportation Department's work plan for 2020, according to the figures. The amount exceeds that allotted to Penobscot County at \$102 million and Cumberland County at \$97 million, which were the second- and third-highest county recipients for road projects.

The bulk of the money entering Aroostook is going toward the international bridge that connects the town of Madawaska to the Canadian city of Edmundston. Totaling at more than \$84 million, it accounts for more than half of the funding for road projects in The County for the 2020 fiscal year, and is the largest single road project in the entire state in terms of cost.

The current bridge spanning the St. John River, which defines much of the border between northern Maine and New Brunswick, is approaching 100 years old, and is the subject of a five-ton weight restriction that was placed on it in 2017. The weight restriction means that heavier vehicles that may be transporting goods for key industries in the region, such as lumber and paper, are forced to find a detour.

The Transportation Department did receive a \$36 million federal grant last July to assist in the financing of the project, but even after subtracting that amount, it still remains the most expensive project for the state.

“This is a challenging project because we have the U.S. customs facility right there. This is a bridge over an international waterway connecting two countries, so you can think of all the entities that are involved to make sure this happens and it happens right,” said Paul Merrill, a spokesman for the Transportation Department. “This involves the U.S. government, the Canadian government, the state of Maine, the province of New Brunswick, the towns of Edmundston and Madawaska — and certainly anyone who lives and works around that area is going to be affected so we’re doing our best to make sure that people know what is going on.”

Merrill also said that the department lacks the necessary funds to do everything it needed to repair roads and bridges throughout the state, and unless a bipartisan consensus can be reached at the State House in Augusta, it is likely to remain that way.

“We know that the roads and projects need more attention than we’re able to provide,” he said. “They are all safe, otherwise we would close them, but we know they need attention and we’ll just do our best to try to make the best of the funds we have and keep fighting for more.”

Other notable projects in Aroostook are a slope stabilization project off Route 161 in Allagash for \$8.7 million, bridge rehabilitation projects along the Maine Northern Railway for \$5.7 million and reconstruction around Houlton International Airport for \$4.7 million.

Though Madawaska’s new bridge is by far the largest project in Maine in terms of cost, the other members of the top three costliest projects in the state are also bridge replacements: One at the town line between Brunswick and Topsham that also traverses Cumberland and Sagadahoc counties, costs \$19.8 million. It’s followed by a \$17.9 million bridge replacement project in Portland.

Penobscot County’s most expensive projects also included bridgework, with a \$13.5 million budget for fixing the Wilson Street Bridge in Brewer, and \$10 million for improvements to the Detective Benjamin Campbell Bridge in Millinocket.

The most expensive project in Penobscot county is the Wilson Street/I395 Bridge in Brewer—a perfectly good bridge that is only being replaced to support the new connector project that the City of Brewer does not support. The bridge replacement is considered the first phase of the connector project.