

Maine won't borrow for roads and bridges in 2022 for the 1st time in 8 years

Caitlin Andrews 2.24.2022

[Click here to view online.](#)

AUGUSTA, Maine — Gov. Janet Mills will not ask Maine voters to approve tens of millions in borrowing for the state's transportation system after putting a big chunk of surplus money toward roads and bridges in a recent spending proposal.

The Maine Department of Transportation has struggled with chronic underfunding for the last decade. It has become so reliant on annual borrowing to leverage federal funding that it assumes the Legislature and voters will endorse \$100 million in annual borrowing to help plug a maintenance shortfall that was pegged in early 2021 at [\\$230 million per year](#).

Voters have approved every single one and the politics of funding roads more sustainably have been tricky. While the Democratic governor helped convene a task force that sought long-term fixes, [its work broke down in 2020](#) over disagreements about increasing the gas tax or shifting revenue regularly out of the regular state budget.

The decision to not borrow is a direct consequence of Maine's huge \$800 million projected revenue surplus through mid-2023, fueled by a wave of federal COVID-19 aid. Mills earmarked \$100 million for transportation in [a \\$850 million spending package](#) released last week. If approved, that money would largely support 2023 projects.

While it comes ahead of [\\$1.3 billion coming to Maine](#) for roads over five years as part of the infrastructure deal inked by Congress last year, that is only 25 percent more than the state was getting under an existing federal formula. This money is unlikely to be a long-term solution.

The transportation department's most recent [three-year work plan](#) notes the state is reviewing long-term goals and new federal programs mean it may have to adjust to how much money it puts toward projects. A rise in construction costs and workforce challenges could also make projects much more expensive and is making it harder to pin down the shortfall now.

"By next year, the fog currently surrounding these variables should clear, and we expect to be able to provide a better estimate of unmet need," said Nina Fisher, a deputy Maine transportation commissioner. [MaineDOT Talking point]

The surplus money provides some certainty for transportation advocates and the people who work on projects, Maria Fuentes, executive director of the Maine Better Transportation Association, said. While she argued it was wise to invest some of the one-time money into roads and bridges, she noted the state is always going to need to put up money to match federal dollars if it wants support for infrastructure projects.

"I think a lot of people think we don't have to worry about transportation because there's so much money from the feds," she said.