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EDITORIAL

Yet another reason to invest in Maine's transportation infrastructure

Ashley L. Conti | BDN

Construction crews worked in 2014 to cut up the road near the intersection of State Street and Exchange Street in Bangor.

By The Editorial Board. The BDN Opinion Section operates independently, and does not set newsroom policies or contribute to reporting or editing articles elsewhere in the newspaper or on bangordailynews.com. • July 22, 2019

Maine has the fourth worst infrastructure in the country, according to a new evaluation. "Roads and bridges are in terrible shape," CNBC said of Maine in its annual rankings.

Maine lawmakers should not need another report to know that much more money needs to be allocated to repairing and upgrading the state's roads, bridges and other infrastructure. There is a growing library of these reports that demonstrate Maine's failure to adequately invest in our infrastructure. In May, for example, a national transportation research group found that 22 percent of Maine's rural roads are rated in poor condition — ninth worst in the nation.

Combined state and federal funding falls short of meeting transportation goals set in state statute by more than $100 million per year, Transportation Commissioner Bruce Van Note told lawmakers earlier this year. That gap will only grow as projects continue to exceed state cost expectations.

The funding need is even more perilous this summer after the Legislature failed to agree on a package of state borrowing before adjourning and heading home last month.

The Maine Department of Transportation has come to rely on about $100 million in bonds each year to cover the cost of road and bridge maintenance and repairs. Although borrowed money should generally not be used for repair projects that may not last as long as the interest payments, this remains a vital source of funding for MDOT.

Deputy Transportation Commissioner Nina Fisher told the BDN last month that the department "can't function" as it needs to in the coming year without the roughly $100 million proposed bond funding, which is still up in the air after lawmakers failed to reach a bond agreement in June.

The expectation — and our hope — has been that the Legislature will reconvene for a special session to complete a bond package this summer, but time is running short to get a proposal prepared by voter consideration in November. The Maine Secretary of State's Office says it needs any potential bonds by the end of August in order for ballots to be printed on time ahead of the election this fall.

The short-term imperative to address this bond situation in time for November is clear. But in the long term, Policymakers must look beyond this impending problem to consider more sustainable and predictable sources of funding for infrastructure projects. Raising fuel taxes, at the state and federal level, must be part of the solution.

The tax, which makes up a substantial portion of the state's highway fund revenue, is now 30 cents per gallon for gasoline and 31 cents per gallon for diesel fuel. This is unchanged since 2011.

These tax rates were adjusted annually for inflation until 2011, when indexing was repealed. Now, like federal fuel taxes, the state gas tax is not keeping pace with transportation needs. Nobody likes talking about raising taxes, but given this lag and Maine's well-documented need for transportation investment, it's time for a difficult conversation.