

# THE MONROE NEWS

WEDNESDAY, MAY 27, 2020

## Opinion

### My Take: White House moves to revamp Michigan infrastructure



By Gene Clem

The Trump administration just announced a regulatory overhaul that could drastically speed up the construction of highways, bridges, and other major infrastructure projects throughout Michigan.

The reforms couldn't have come at a better time. Michigan's pothole-pockmarked roads are the worst in the nation, according to a recent study conducted by Tesla. Almost 1,200 bridges throughout the state are structurally deficient. And aging pipelines need replacing.

By fast-tracking infrastructure projects, the overhaul will improve public safety, ease congestion, boost the economy, and improve Michiganders' overall quality of life.

The proposed reforms would change how the federal government implements the National Environmental Policy Act. That 1970 law requires all government-funded infrastructure projects — everything from roads and bridges to water systems and energy pipelines — to undergo rigorous environmental impact reviews.

NEPA was well-intentioned. But over the past half-century, the review process has morphed from a reasonable environmental safeguard into a bureaucratic nightmare.

To comply with NEPA, companies must now seek approval from multiple federal agencies, navigate a maze of rules and requirements, and submit reams of detailed documents. As of 2011, environmental impact studies for transportation projects took 6.6 years, on average. That's up from 2.2 years back in the 1970s.

Given all this red tape, it's no wonder that many Michigan infrastructure projects get stuck in limbo. "In Grand Haven, Mich., a two-lane roadway and bridge project to cut down on congestion and handle an additional 15,000 to 20,000 cars was delayed 16 years by NEPA reviews," the president of North America's Building Trades Unions recently noted.

Such lengthy delays like these have left Michigan's infrastructure in a sorry state. A recent report from the American Society of Civil Engineers looked at 13 different infrastructure categories, including dams, wastewater management, energy, transit, and roads. In every one of those areas, Michigan's infrastructure was deemed poor or mediocre.

Our roads are particularly awful. Forty-four percent of the state's major roads are in either poor or mediocre condition, according to a recent study by the transportation research group TRIP. In Detroit, that figure is 70 percent.

Michigan drivers suffer the consequences every time they hit potholes and blown out tires or break axles. Poor road conditions cost Michigan drivers \$4.6 billion a year in car repairs. And traffic congestion alone costs the average Detroit motorist almost \$1,300 annually in lost productivity. Inadequate infrastructure endangers Michiganders' physical health too. Nearly 11 percent of the state's 11,228 bridges are structurally deficient. That's well above the national average of 7.6 percent. In January 2019, a bridge at Detroit's Packard Plant collapsed onto the roadway below. Thankfully, no one was injured -- but the collapsing structure could have easily killed passing drivers.

Similarly, much of the state's natural gas infrastructure needs replacing. Last winter, during one of the worst cold snaps in years, utilities struggled to deliver natural gas to 1.8 million Michigan residents. Our state could avoid such emergencies in the future by upgrading outdated pipelines.

President Trump's proposed regulatory changes would instruct federal agencies to complete environmental reviews within two years. Three in four NEPA impact studies currently take more than two years to complete. So this change alone would significantly speed up construction projects.

The overhaul would also put a single agency in charge of each NEPA review, further streamlining the process while keeping key environmental regulations in place.

From its roads and bridges to its pipelines and water systems, much of Michigan's infrastructure is on the brink of collapse. Modernizing NEPA will keep our state up-and-running well into the future.

— Gene Clem is a veteran and member of the Kalamazoo County Republican Party. He previously served as a Sixth District Executive Committee representative for the Michigan Republican Party.