



THINK

SECTION C

WHY ARE THE ROADS SO BAD?



Due to our environment and underinvestment, Michigan's roads get worse, Coppersmith writes.
Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

Michigan makes only short-term fixes when the potholes get too big to ignore

BY ROB COPPERSMITH

It's no secret that Michigan's roads are in bad shape. As road crews are dealing with filling potholes and construction season gets underway, Michigan drivers are seeing once more just how much work still needs to be done to get our roads and bridges back in good shape.

With more than 120,000 miles of paved roadway across our state, the cost to keep roads in good condition is significant. Currently, more than 42% of Michigan's lane miles are rated in poor condition. And if we keep on the path we're on, we will see that number rise further to nearly 50% by 2031.

Due to a combination of our unique environment with harsh winters - as well as a freeze-thaw cycle that punishes our roads - and a significant underinvestment in our infrastructure upkeep, Michigan's roads continue to get worse and worse.

Study after study shows the bad shape our infrastructure is in and how much worse it could become. The American Society of Civil Engineers issued a grade of D- for Michigan's roads in their Report Card for Michigan's Infrastructure. The 2022 TRIP Report estimated that the poor condition of our roads costs the average household \$4,845 annually due to traffic crashes, congestion caused by unreliable roads and the cost to repair cars due to roads in bad shape.

About the author

Rob Coppersmith is the executive vice president of the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association (MITA), a statewide construction trade association that consists of more than 500 Michigan companies representing construction disciplines such as road and bridge, sewer and water, utility, railroad, excavation, and specialty construction throughout the state of Michigan



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Even worse, that report shows that if we don't make a significant investment soon, the average household could be spending as much as \$6,273 annually at the end of the next 10 years.

And here's a real startling number: 11%, or 1,240, of Michigan's 11,284 bridges are classified as structurally deficient, according to the American Road and Transportation Builders Association. These are bridges that Michigan families use daily to go to school, work, and vacation. If we continue to underinvest in necessary repairs, it's estimated that the number of bridges classified as structurally deficient could rise to as many as 1,976 - a staggering 18% of Michigan's bridges - over the next decade. This is unacceptable.

Former Gov. Rick Snyder's 21st Century Infrastructure Commission issued a report in 2016 that found Michigan needs an additional \$2.2 billion in annual funding to get 85 to 90% of our roads up to good condition. Since the time that report was published, Michigan's leaders have not developed a long-term funding plan that would dedicate the needed funds to get our roads back to good condition.

In addition, Michigan's gas tax, which contributes about half of our funding for infrastructure construction and maintenance, is the lowest in the Midwest. And with the rise in fuel efficiency and the emergence of electric vehicles, we are seeing revenues generated at the pump fall, and that will only continue in the coming years as technology continues to improve.

When we notice that roads are in better condition in neighboring states, that is one of the factors. Our neighbors, such as Ohio, have been willing to make the needed investments for road and bridge repairs, spending nearly \$1 billion more annually than Michigan does.

We've had a series of short-term investments made, such as the recently passed Building Michigan Together Plan that would pump \$4.7 billion of state surplus and federal stimulus dollars into repairs and upgrades for Michigan's infrastructure.

The federal infrastructure plan enacted in late 2021 also provides a short-term boost over the next five years. In addition, the \$3.5 billion bonding program that began under Gov. Gretchen Whitmer provides another short-term injection of much-needed road repair dollars for state trunklines through 2025.

But these short-term investments, while helpful, are not nearly enough to get

Michigan on the right track. And it falls well short of the needed \$44 billion of additional funding that Michigan needs over the next two decades.

By only funding for short-term fixes, we aren't making the necessary repairs to keep our roads in a good-working order for the long-term. Instead, we continue to keep coming back every five to 10 years to fix the same problems over and over again.

It is abundantly clear that the way we've been funding Michigan's infrastructure in the past several decades does not work. Like our neighbors in Ohio, we need to make the necessary investment in our roads and bridges if we want to see improvements.

The solution to our road funding problem is a long-term, sustainable funding plan that would dedicate the necessary resources to fixing Michigan's roads and keep them in good working condition. Without a plan that provides stable funding for Michigan's crumbling infrastructure, we continue kicking the can down the road while conditions continue to worsen.

The lifetime of a road is very predictable. We know that when a new road opens, it will have a lifespan of 30 to 50 years. But without the necessary long-term plan to make the short, mid-range and long-term repairs needed during that lifespan, we fall further behind in keeping up with the problems we know will eventually develop.

Currently, we make only short-term fixes when the problem gets too big to ignore. This isn't good or responsible budgeting, and that isn't how we should treat the investments we're making in our roads.

Putting in place a stable funding plan works for the construction industry and the state as a whole. It allows construction companies to plan long-term, allowing them to build and retain workforces that can repair our roads and keep them in good working condition.

Keeping the construction industry guessing on funding each year doesn't allow for them to make the necessary investments in equipment and forces them to continue scaling their workforces up and down with the unpredictability in infrastructure funding. This is expensive and only adds to the rising cost of fixing our failing infrastructure.

Funding infrastructure should be a nonpartisan issue that all sides can agree on. At the end of the day, fixing our roads is a quality-of-life issue. Do we want to continue driving on awful roads that cost Michigan families thousands of dollars

each year or do we want to invest in our roads and provide relief for Michigan families?

We know that infrastructure funding will only decrease over the next decade if we stay on the same path we're on. We have the opportunity now to address this crisis head on.

We need Michigan's leaders to put aside their differences and come together to develop a long-term, sustainable funding plan that will put Michigan drivers first and get our roads back on the right track.