



Everything Michigan

Editorial: Two steps to fix Michigan's roads

By The Grand Rapids Press Editorial Board

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Michigan's roads are a mess, and they're getting messier.

Two steps are needed to fix that problem.

First, and most urgently, the state needs a **rapid on-ramp for new road funding**. Unless Gov. Jennifer Granholm and lawmakers take that step soon, Michigan will begin losing federal transportation dollars beginning next year. Highway funds that should be paving roads in Grand Rapids will go to Indianapolis, Chicago and Cleveland instead.

Second, **lawmakers have to find a longer-term solution** to paying for roads, one that goes beyond the soon-to-be-obsolete gas tax.

Without both those measures, Michigan faces even harder economic times ahead. Highways and bridges are the basic building blocks of a strong state. The road to prosperity is smoothly paved and built to last.

The road to economic hell? It's pocked with potholes, if it exists at all.

Road funding was the second topic in The Press' **Michigan 10.0 series**, stories about major issues facing the state. Anyone who's white-knuckled her way along one of the state's deteriorating highways, or faced an unexpected repair bill because of tooth-shattering breaks in the pavement, knows the problem.

We didn't get here overnight. U.S. Census Bureau data show Michigan among the bottom 10 states in per-capita state and local road funding for more than 40 years. We are currently ranked 41st. According to the Reason Foundation's 2007 Annual Report on the Performance of State Highway Systems, Michigan ranks eighth worst in overall performance; 16th worst based on the number of deficient bridges; fourth worst for rural interstate conditions; eighth worst for urban interstate conditions; 10th in the amount of additional road miles needed; sixth in the total cost of road miles needed.

Not numbers to make Michigan proud.

Next year we will begin leaving matching federal transportation dollars in Washington.

By 2014, the state will have sacrificed \$2 billion in federal road funds. Michigan currently receives 92 cents back for every transportation dollar it sends to Washington. Without any change in current gas taxes, that number will drop to 50 cents.

Roads will continue to decay. **Construction jobs will be lost.** Motorists will pay more for car repairs.

PARTICIPATE IN MICHIGAN 10.0

Read the series: Our Michigan 10.0 series explores the top 10 issues holding back Michigan's economy. This month's focus is on Michigan's ailing road system.

Replay our live chat: On Wednesday, we held a live chat about roads with Rich Studley, Michigan Chamber of Commerce president, and Mike Nystrom, of the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association.

Lend your wit: We're carrying on the fine tradition of political cartooning with a pothole cartoon. **You write the caption.**

Businesses will look at Michigan's crumbling infrastructure as a reason to invest elsewhere.

The last time the Legislature raised gas taxes was 13 years ago. The gas tax rate went from 15 cents a gallon to 19 cents a gallon. Diesel fuel stayed at 15 cents. The diesel disparity makes no sense, especially since Michigan continues to have the highest weight limits for trucks in the nation. That, together with a brutal freeze-thaw cycle, contributes to wear and tear.

Most lawmakers know a gas tax hike is necessary, but have resisted doing the right thing. During the past five years, some 13 bills have been introduced in the Legislature to fix the problem. None has found traction.

But more taxes won't be enough. Gas tax revenue has been declining the last two years. Part of the reason is a bad economy. But part of the reason, a longer-term concern, is that gas-sipping vehicles are replacing old guzzlers. That problem will grow more acute as hybrids and electric vehicles become increasingly popular. Even increased gas taxes won't provide the funding needed for the long haul.

Michigan is one of 24 states with **no toll system for its roads**. Tolls, like gas taxes, are a fairly pure form of user fee. You get what you pay for.

Increasingly sophisticated technology makes toll collection easier. Electronic transponders that can be used in multiple states allow drivers to whiz through toll collection points without having to chuck quarters at collection baskets. Another possible solution is GPS tracking that could charge drivers for miles driven. As gas use decreases, those kinds of reforms will be essential to maintaining the quality of Michigan roads.

But for now, gas taxes are the primary mechanism of road funding and they are depleted to the point that roads are falling apart, and crucial projects are being left on the drawing board.

Travelers to Michigan frequently comment on how they can tell immediately when they drive over the state line. The jarring sensation begins.

If lawmakers don't find a quick infusion of cash and a more permanent method to fund roads, more and more businesses and workers will begin heading in the other direction: Onto the smooth pavement of neighboring states. That would be jarring, indeed, for Michigan.

E-mail a letter to the editor for publication online and in print: **pulse@grpress.com** Please keep letters to less than 200 words and include your full name, home address and phone number.

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