

Editorial: Michigan: The road less traveled?

By Muskegon Chronicle

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Bumpy roads discourage development, tourism



Yet another report about the poor quality of Michigan's roads has brought the issue directly to West Michigan.

In Tuesday's Chronicle it was reported that of the 10 counties with the most federally funded roads in poor condition, three were in West Michigan — Oceana, Mason and Manistee — the heart of the state's tourism region. Oceana topped the list with 66 percent of its roads in bad shape.

Newaygo County was ranked 24th and Ottawa 58th. Muskegon County came in at a pretty amazing 80th.

It's not the first time a report has singled out Michigan's bumpy roads. Here's just a sampling from the past year:

- Michigan drew national attention on the History Channel last summer as part of a show titled, "The Crumbling of America." The History Channel visited Michigan in April and filmed portions of our deteriorating roadways to highlight the issue of a crumbling transportation system across the nation.
- The American Society of Civil Engineers recently gave Michigan's road system an overall grade of "D." About 10,000 miles of primary roads in the state deteriorated from "good" or "fair" to "poor" between 2004 and 2007.
- The Reason Foundation, a Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit think tank, found in its 2007 "Report on the Performance of State Highway Systems," that Michigan had the eighth worst road system in the nation based on overall performance.
- A Michigan Department of Transportation report showed 919 highway bridges are "functionally obsolete" and another 471 are "structurally deficient." More than 250 of these bridges are at least 75 years old, meaning they were built before the Great Depression.
- The County Road Association of Michigan said 20 of Michigan's 83 counties have turned rural roads to gravel with no immediate plans to repave. Approximately 50 miles have been reverted in the past three years, including 2 miles of Brunswick Road in Muskegon County.
- "A Quick Guide to Roads & Road Funding in Michigan" by the County Road Association Township Relations Committee, found Michigan has the eighth largest public road system in the nation. Yet, in 2006, Michigan ranked 47th in per capita spending on roads, based on U.S. Census Bureau statistics.

Part of the joy of a Michigan vacation or the fun of a business trip is the terrific scenery while you're driving to your destination. In the past, smooth roads have taken tourists to every nook and cranny of the state without any trouble.

Now driving has become a chore despite the incredible scenery.

Since May, the state Legislature has been studying a 13-bill package to shore up our roads. The bills would increase the gas tax from 19 cents to a maximum of 34 cents a gallon over the next seven years at a rate of 2 cents a year. Registration fees for new cars would jump as much as 20 percent annually over the next five years. By 2014, the annual cost of registering a \$27,000 car purchased that year would be \$265. The current fee is \$136.

The bills also include legislation to encourage private transportation investment and authorizes the Michigan Department of Transportation to explore charging tolls.

The intent is to raise an additional \$1.8 billion in new funding through 2014, but to quickly generate enough cash to make sure Michigan doesn't forfeit some \$2 billion in federal road funding that the state currently lacks the money to match. Without that match, the \$2 billion would fund road projects in other states — that's money Michigan residents have already paid in federal gas taxes that won't be coming back.

Michigan's roads are in poor condition partly because of the economy and partly because of the improved fuel economy of our vehicles and tires. With people buying less gas, they're paying fewer taxes. So, we need to take a look at how we fund road repair, a basic government service along with education, public safety and prisons.

It's a tough time to talk about increasing taxes, but it makes some sense. Vehicle registration and gasoline taxes for a typical Michigan driver come to just pennies over \$1 per day. Poor roads cost the average motorist an additional \$318 per year in vehicle repairs, lost time and wages, according to the County Road Association of Michigan.

Backers of the bills in the Legislature say the gas tax increase would cost the average driver about \$150 per year. The average increase in registration fees would be about \$129, so the total increase is still below the average cost of repairs caused by bad roads.

Gas tax and registration costs are basically user fees — people who use the roads are paying for them — and that includes truckers and tourists.

Good roads are a business development and retention tool.

Generating the funds to match federal dollars will put people to work. It will bring tourists to our state or move them around the state, which will put people to work.

An investment in jobs is money well spent.

Contact your lawmaker today.

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