

LIVINGSTON DAILY.COM

August 4, 2008

Bumpy future ahead for road funding

*By Christopher Behnan
DAILY PRESS & ARGUS*

A report that states the costs of Michigan's basic road and bridge needs have doubled to \$6.1 billion per year is especially bad news for Livingston County, which receives the least road funding per capita in the state, officials said.

Making matters worse, the state is expected to lose \$4.5 billion in federal road funding between 2010 and 2015, according to a report of the Highway, Road and Bridge Subcommittee of the Citizens Advisory Committee, which reports to the state's appointed Transportation Funding Task Force.

The report was delivered in late July.

The task force is expected to issue a preliminary report with funding alternatives to the 19 cents-per-gallon gas tax — a mechanism road officials said is proving unreliable as a source of road money — on Oct. 31. A final report is due April 1.

The most recent study's findings are hardly news to Livingston County, which already struggles to keep road dollars coming in, said county Road Commission Mana-ging Director Mike Craine.

A big factor is that Livingston County is considered a "donor county," which means its residents contribute more in transportation taxes than the amount of those taxes spent within the county.

The Road Commission has gone as far as to look into returning low-volume paved roads rated "poor" to gravel to keep them safe for motorists if funding sources dry up.

"We are at rock bottom of the state that's approaching rock bottom," Craine said.

"We've been paying the freight for everybody else for a long time," he added.

Making matters worse, the county often must turn its back on federal funding it's eligible for because it can't make put up matching funds, said Keith Ledbetter, director of legislative affairs for the Okemos-based Michigan Infrastructure & Transportation Association.

"They're already losing dollars they're eligible for. You're already facing that crunch," Ledbetter said of Livingston County.

"We are digging ourselves into a hole we may never be able to dig ourselves out of unless we get going right now," he added.

The report said Michigan's failing road and bridge system has created a \$7 billion annual price tag for Michigan drivers due to lost time, wasted fuel, crashes and other factors.

With Friday's one-year anniversary of the collapse of the Interstate 35 bridge in Minnesota, one could ask if any lessons have been learned about the importance of bridge safety, Craine said.

Where are we one year later?

"The answer is, nowhere," he said.

The cost crunch

As the state's and county's road spending power decreases, construction costs will only increase, officials said.

The estimated cost of statewide pavement improvements has increased from roughly

\$3 billion in 2004 to the \$6.1 billion figure in 2007 — an increase of about \$1 billion per year.

Specifically, the costs of fuel, trucks and asphalt are soaring while revenues are declining after staying stagnant for nearly a decade, the report states.

The bottom line: Michigan is challenged to fund temporary fixes, let alone capacity improvements.

"We're talking about surviving. We're talking about a patch of potholes," Ledbetter said. "We have no real opportunity in the near future to provide any kind of increased lanes."

Craine said long-range projects such as the Latson Road interchange at Interstate 96 — which has been on the table for some 15 years — won't be endangered in the short term, but more immediate safety projects might be at risk.

The state now spends about \$3.2 billion a year for its transportation system. The committee report says \$6.1 billion annually is needed for "good" improvements, while bringing it into a "better" condition would require \$12.6 billion a year. No figure was provided for reaching the "best" level.

The Michigan Asset Management Council estimates an 88 percent increase in road miles in "poor" condition in Michigan between 2004 and 2007.

"There's not a motorist in Livingston County or in Michigan that doesn't already know this from the seat of their pants up," Craine said.

Bridges, nearly 30 percent of which are considered "structurally deficient" in the report, are another matter.

That not only presents safety concerns, but could deter companies from doing business in Michigan, as opposed to other Midwest states with better bridge infrastructure, the report says.

Different pain at the pump

While motorists groan at \$4-per-gallon gasoline, state and county road officials see their resources decline when motorists purchase less gasoline.

The last state gas tax increase came in 1997, an increase from 15 cents per gallon to 19 cents per gallon.

Some have proposed a 9-cent increase spread over three years, and increasing vehicle registration fees by 50 percent. Those ideas were set aside when Gov. Jennifer Granholm named the task force to explore alternatives to fuel taxes.

Craine said the 9-cent proposal deserves a full-fledged debate.

Cutbacks in gas consumption have forced the Road Commission to replace personnel on a limited basis, re-evaluate operational costs and work with smaller project lists.

Craine said the fact that Michigan has ranked as one of the bottom 10 states in road investment for more than 40 years illustrates just how far behind Michigan's road system is.

"This isn't recent. It's a persistent problem in Michigan," he added.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Contact Daily Press & Argus reporter Christopher Behnan at (517) 548-7108 or at cbehnan@gannett.com
