



Rough Road Ahead

Maine's roadways are a mess. It's time to face reality and ante up—or suffer the safety and economic consequences. BY ORLANDO E. DELOGU

Two major reports have come out in the last few months that speak to Maine's highway system. The first, prepared by a national organization, the Reason Foundation, was the 19th Annual Report on the Performance of State Highway Systems. In their report, 11 different factors were used to evaluate the quality of existing state systems and the effectiveness of dollars spent by state highway bureaucracies in each of the 50 states. Maine's highway system today ranks 32nd. More alarming, however, is the 10-year trend—in 2000 we ranked 15th. Mid-decade we were in the low 20s. In 2007, the high 20s, and now 32nd. The downward trend, the declining physical condition of our road and bridge systems, and the disinvestment in our highways could not be more clear.

The second report prepared by Maine's Department of Transportation, titled *Connecting Maine: Planning Our Transportation Future*, undertakes an assessment of the recent past of Maine's transportation (primarily highway) system, and then purports to look out to the year 2030, measur-

lays some basic facts on the table: Over the last decade, vehicle miles in Maine have increased by 20%—more population, more cars, more visitors, and greater reliance on truck transportation. This is not going to end.

Over this same period, the MDOT report makes clear that there has been an increasing level of underfunding of needed new construction—and, more importantly, the repair, maintenance, and upkeep of existing roads and bridges. Furthermore, dollars committed today buy far less actual highway improvement than they did a decade ago, as highway construction costs are rising much more rapidly than revenue streams.

The key reason for Maine's underfunding of highway infrastructure is the shrinking of federal highway aid dollars. In Maine (and most other states) federal dollars have historically provided a large share of total annual state highway construction budgets. The MDOT report points out that a decade ago, federal dollars provided more than 70% of MDOT's capital construction budget, with the balance coming from Maine funding sources. Today, federal dollars provide only a little over 60% of MDOT's capital budget.

Growing federal deficits, and the fact that the federal fuel tax (18 cents per gallon) has not changed in 14 years, suggest that this downturn in federal highway dollars will not end anytime soon. The short-run burst in federal dollars created by stimulus funding was helpful, but does not significantly alter the bigger picture.

Given these realities—i.e., increased highway use, increasing construction costs, and fewer federal dollars—the only way Maine could have avoided the Reason report findings is for Maine to have increased its highway funding effort. But that didn't

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ing need against realistically-foreseeable dollar resources. It's not a pretty picture—but one that largely explains the Reason Foundation report findings.

Looking at where we are now, the MDOT report

happen. Instead of rising to the occasion to meet real highway system needs, Maine has for some time taken a timid approach to highway construction bonding, and refused to increase its fuel tax (the primary source of capital construction funds) and/or to commit general fund revenues to facilitate a reasonable program of road/bridge building, maintenance, and repair.

But we all know that an effective transportation system is an essential piece of state infrastructure for public safety and economic reasons; it facilitates any and all types of capital investment growth, tax base growth, and job creation. We also know that Maine is a big state with limited rail, air, and water interconnectivity. The only alternative is a highway system that works, a system that moves people and products safely and efficiently. Still, both the federal and Maine state government continue to disinvest in this infrastructure system—and then we wonder why the economy isn't expanding as rapidly as we would like. Our policy makers need a better grip on reality.

Clearly, the disjoint between the highway system we say we need and Maine's highway tax/spending policies has created an impending transportation meltdown—but we continue to deny the obvious. In the last legislative session a one cent increase in the fuel tax was defeated. The "no new taxes" crowd carried the day. There was not one highway bond issue on the recent November ballot. And our new governor ran on the pledge of no tax increases, no bonding.

In short, notwithstanding MDOT's plea "that the state ... take bold and decisive actions to ensure that [our highway] infrastructure does not slip further," it seems almost a certainty that the underfunding and deterioration will continue, and highway safety and our economy will suffer. One can only ask, where is our common sense? ■

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