

Minnesota's Roads to Ruin

Despite suffering one of the most traumatic bridge collapse in US history, the Minnesota Republican-controlled legislature continues to underfund the state's roads and highways, which are decaying rapidly due to lack of maintenance. Because of the funding shortfall, focus is increasingly on repairing existing roads with little emphasis on upgrading or expanding the system.

Underfunded, Decaying Roads

More than half the pavement and one-third of the bridges are at least 50 years old. The longer the system remains underfunded the more difficult and expensive it will be to reverse the trend.

The Funding Gap

Attempts to close the funding gap with dedicated funding have been steadfastly refused by the Republican-dominated State Legislature.

- As of 2017, the deficit to maintain the existing roads and bridges was \$400 million per year and predicted to be \$18 billion over the next 20 years.
- Capital funding needs for the state highway system will be \$39 billion dollars over the next 20 years.
- Improvements and expansions of the infrastructure would require an additional \$200 million/year.

Funding for the roadways comes from a combination of dedicated funds and funds from federal or state sources. The dedicated funds are from vehicle registration fees, vehicle fuel, and vehicle sales tax, which have flattened over the years due to improvements in fuel efficiency, a reduction in licensing fees, and a state fuel tax not indexed to inflation. At the same time, the cost of paving and repair has increased; asphalt and concrete have become more expensive, and labor costs have risen.

Funding Disputes Between the Legislature and the Governor

Under the Republican administration prior to current Democratic Governor Dayton, the Republican Legislature's tax cuts left the state with an overall budget shortfall of \$6.2 billion despite a state-mandated requirement for a balanced budget.

Roadway funding options suggested in the past have included an increased fuel tax or increased registration fees. The Republican Legislature has argued that funds can be appropriated from the General Fund and there is no need for dedicated funds. However, under one of its 2017 budget proposals that was vetoed by Governor Dayton, sales tax on auto parts—normally a contributor to the State Highway Trust Fund—would have been redirected to other, non-transportation, uses.

Breaking news: the state bonding bill submitted to the governor in May 2018 proposes to borrow just \$343 million for roads and bridges. It is not known if Governor Dayton will sign the bill or veto it as inadequate.

Conclusion

The Legislature must recognize the increasing deterioration of the state's roads and establish more fixed and steady funding in order to maintain Minnesotans' safety and quality of life.