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Current five-year program doesn't look as bright without long term funding, MDOT says

Road conditions will deteriorate during the next five years as the state's bond program infusing infrastructure with cash winds down and in the absence of a long-term road funding plan from lawmakers, the Department of Transportation director said in a recent interview.

MDOT [Director Brad Wieferich](#) in a recent interview with Gongwer News Service said the Transportation Commission five-year program – which is currently in draft form – works effectively with the constrained amount of funding available.

"I think we're making very good decisions about how we're making these investments, but the plan also does show that without additional investments, we are going to see some pretty significant declines in the condition coming," Wieferich said.

The public comment period just ended on the [five-year program](#), which plans for road funding during the next five fiscal years without any additional money from a potential long-term plan.

[Gov. Gretchen Whitmer](#) has said the 2025-26 fiscal year budget won't be complete without a road funding plan. Whitmer has floated a plan she said would put \$3 billion more into roads through a mix of funding cuts, new revenue and removing the sales tax from fuel and replacing it with a revenue-neutral tax.

The House has passed a proposal that gets to \$3 billion without any new revenue and heavily relies on redirecting General Fund money into roads. The Senate – though this week there were rumblings a plan was imminent – has not formally introduced a proposal. Senators have insisted they can negotiate a road funding plan as part of the budget without acting on a proposal alone.

When looking at the state trunkline freeway and non-freeway pavement conditions, the department laid out the differences between the current investment projected into pavement improvement at \$760 million year average to an additional \$2.5 billion annual investment. With the current investment projected, less than 50% of roads would be considered good or fair condition by 2040.

With an additional \$2.5 billion, the roads would surpass the department's goal of 90% of good or fair.

Breaking it down, MDOT is estimating \$10.6 billion to go to the Trunkline Highway Capital Program for construction of 1,431 lane-mile improvements per year, replacement and improvement of 211 miles per year, extending the life of 1,220 miles each year in preventive measures and repairing 56 bridges per year.

That compares to \$12.3 billion in the five-year plan at the height of the bonds, 2022-26, or about \$400 million less per year. There were about 550 lane mile improvements over what MDOT forecasts in the new five-year plan plus more than 100 more bridges repaired.

The projection for the Passenger Rail, Freight Rail and Ports Program investments stand at about \$809 million over five years. The Aeronautics Program is estimated to receive \$900 million over five years.

In the upcoming 2025-26 fiscal year, the department is projecting \$3 billion in federal and state revenue as well as other additional funding sources like grants and the bonds that are projected to be allocated in the next year.

Around \$2.1 billion is allocated to preservation of state trunkline roads and bridges and \$959 million for bus, marine, rail, port and aeronautics programs.

Wieferich said the plan maximizes what the state can do with the money they have by working on good roads to keep them in good shape for a smaller dollar amount than fixing roads that are more deteriorated.

"Keeping the good roads good is going to kind of stave off the need for more investment," Wieferich said.

Wieferich said people can tell what is being funded and what isn't on their commutes to work, and he is most worried about those non-freeways that are in decline.

He said when looking at these comparisons, a longer-term plan is much more sustainable to planning and efficiently delivering work than one-time funding injections that have made these conditions spike and then slump back down again like the American Recovery Act in 2009 or the bond program.

He said without a long-term plan, the department would have to do more bare bones projects like what is projected in the five-year program.

"It's going to be the Band-aids and duct tape and baling wire to kind of keep things going as best we can, knowing that the system is going to decline," Wieferich said. "When we have additional investment, now we can take a look at that strategy and say we still need state of good repair. Yes, we still need to do good asset management, but where are the modernization things that we can start to look at?"

This modernization possible with additional funding includes physically reconfiguring roadways and addressing mobility and congestion of operations overall.

[Rep. Donni Steele](#), R-Orion, chair of the [House Appropriations State and Local Transportation Subcommittee](#) , said the House's proposed plan doesn't just backfill what the department needs once these bonds dry up, but also changes the way the funding is allocated. She said more funding would go to smaller municipalities for local roads, breaking it down by the number of roads the counties are in charge of.

She said in Bloomfield Hills, part of her district, people are paying \$70,000 in property taxes for roads that have "crumbled so bad it's almost become dirt road." She said the counties are responsible for taking care of when they don't have funding mechanisms for neighborhood roads.

"(The department) threw in an extra \$3 billion when they borrowed the money for the trunk lines," Steele said. "Where they are now is they're in like, good condition, per se, but it's like, so they took care of the biggest needs, but you can't not pay attention to the ones that were good six years ago."

Wieferich, on the other hand, said fixing the freeways is important because while it only makes up 10% of Michigan's roads, the state highways handle more than half of the traffic and 80% of commercial traffic.

"It might be a smaller from a lane miles perspective, but from an economic perspective and really getting people from point A to point B across the state is critically important," Wieferich said.

Steele said the House plan also pays down debt, as the state continues to pay off bonds from former Gov. John Engler's administration and Whitmer's more recent bonding.

With the continuous budget talks, Steele compared the Senate asking for tax increases to be part of a roads plan to a family with a leaky roof still going on a vacation to Walt Disney World rather than fixing the leaky roof.

"When the Senate says they don't want to move money around and they just want to go after more funding sources, I don't think that that's responsible," Steele said. "I mean, everybody wants to go to Disney World."

[Sen. Veronica Klinefelt](#), D-Eastpointe, chair of the [Senate Appropriations Transportation Subcommittee](#), said the House's budget plan is "unrealistic" without negotiating numbers in the other budgets.

"You can't get to addressing the needs of roads without at least looking at funding sources, so they have to be part of the conversation," Klinefelt said.

The transportation budget needs to be able to stand on its own, she said.

She said when the House asks where the Senate's roads plan is that it's contingent on what will be in the "give and take" in negotiations. She said she is ready to come up with something to fund roads if it doesn't gut other services to the extreme, saying she's optimistic they will get there.

Klinefelt said the existing plan by the department that fixed lots of state roads doesn't put a dent in the county roads.

She said she thinks everyone believes there must be a fix.

She said in MDOT's five-year plan that while the money could be sustainable or effective without extra funding in keeping the state highways in relatively good condition, the rest of the roads continue to deteriorate.

In the budget plans, Klinefelt said she's very hopeful they'll reach a compromise, but it may not be an exactly happy ending.

"Usually, if nobody's happy, that means both sides have given in some and reached a compromise and kind of, from my time in working as an elected official for years and years, that's usually the best outcome," Klinefelt said.

– By Liz Nass

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