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States struggle to sell the public on crumbling roads and bridges

BOSTON – States across the country are struggling to find the dollars needed to improve roads and bridges, and one part of the problem, according to Indiana Rep. Jim Pressel, is simple marketing.

It's a familiar, decades-long story in Michigan – and a point of deep frustration for [Gov. Gretchen Whitmer](#), whose signature issue as a candidate in 2018 was to enact a long-term funding solution for roads.

At a National Conference of State Legislatures panel this week, Pressel said legislators have an easier time getting public support for controversial but influential tax and fee hikes when constituents better understand why they're necessary, including if the roads are scarred with potholes and bumps.

In 2017, Indiana lawmakers approved a gas tax increase — with language indexing it to maintain revenue growth in future years — that officials at the time hailed as a long-term funding solution.

"Indiana marketed that very well, but it didn't take a lot because our roads were in very poor condition, so I think the constituency and everyone could see the need for it," Pressel said at a panel discussion during the National Conference of State Legislatures annual summit in Boston. "[They weren't] really happy about a 10-cent gas tax increase — another one of those votes that was very tough for me — but they can see the need."

But this year, Pressel said, "we did a terrible job marketing" the latest road funding overhaul.

"Our roads are in good condition for now, but showing that need to the general public, what it's going to be in four or five years, is

extremely difficult," said Pressel, a Republican who leads the Indiana House Roads and Transportation Committee.

Other states are struggling with a similar dynamic, especially as improvements to vehicle mileage and the slow – sometimes shaky – rollout of electric vehicles portend a decline in revenues from taxing gasoline and diesel.

Twenty-nine states projected that their roads, bridges or both will fall short of achieving a state of good repair over the next decade, according to a report published last month by Pew Charitable Trusts.

David Draine, principal officer of Pew Charitable Trusts' state fiscal policy project, described falling short on transportation funding as a "shared challenge" that affects "the majority of states."

Connecticut Sen. Christine Cohen said her colleagues sometimes struggle with the politics of generating new funding for road and bridge investments.

Unlike many other states, Cohen said, Connecticut does not have highway tolling. She described her home as a "pass-through state" whose highways regularly host motorists traveling between Boston and New York.

While Cohen suggested tolling might appear to be a "viable solution, to be charging out-of-staters to be using our roadways," she said the idea has "become a political hot-button issue and very difficult to pass in the state of Connecticut."

"Our special transportation fund is in surplus right now. The end of the year, the fiscal year, [is in a] very good place," Cohen, a Democrat and Senate chair of the Connecticut General Assembly's Transportation Committee, said. "Looking forward, we're not going to be in that rosy sort of place in the future, and so we really have to look at, strategically, what are we bonding? What are we doing? What sort of policies do we want to put in place to ensure that we have a revenue stream that really keep us in the black?"

One idea lawmakers have considered is imposing fees on deliveries, she said. Connecticut also worked to pay down interest on its transportation fund to give budget writers some flexibility in the future.

"Nobody wants to implement a new fee or a new tax, but the reality is we need to be looking at creative ways to have sustainable transportation funding," Cohen said.

Draine warned that deferring maintenance saddles future taxpayers with paying for "what should have been done today."

"When states put this off and don't invest in needed repairs and maintenance and preservation, the bill comes due later, and it's often greater, with the potential of asking the future-generation taxpayers to bear the burden and crowding out other important properties," he said.

– By Chris Lisinski, State Affairs Pro Massachusetts

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