



## Maintenance Backlog Fingered For Huge Number Of Local Road Ballot Questions

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To fully appreciate the number of road-related local ballot proposals being put before voters on Tuesday, consider this: Only if all the local road funding proposals in the last seven Michigan elections were added up would they come close to equaling the 245 on ballots Aug. 6, 2024.

County Roads Association President Denise **DONOHUE** attested to the need of locals for road funding, as counties are responsible for 76 percent of the road miles and 52 percent of the bridges.

Donohue said only about 30 percent of the roads are eligible for federal aid. She said that there was an annual \$2.4 billion deficit for local governments just for routine maintenance. She said there was a \$1.2 billion backlog on fixing bridges, but those would most likely be eligible for federal funding.

On top of that, the main avenue for local road funding, the gas tax, has been falling steadily for the last 25 years as cars transition to electric and fuel-efficient engines. Meanwhile, she said it's been 10 years since the Legislature had done something with road funding.

"I think those are some of the reasons that we say we're facing a road funding fiscal cliff," Donohue said.

She said her "gut" was telling her the township road millages were only going after what county road commissions were requiring.

Donohue said since August 2021, after the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act was passed, the federal government was looking at what the states would spend on transportation.

She said the Michigan Department of Transportation was doing a wonderful job getting some more money through some of the competitive grants, but those competitive grants were very difficult for the local road agencies and rural areas to get.

She said she doesn't believe the federal grants would be enough to take care of the local road issues that are seen in Michigan and the local millages were not necessarily going to help look for any federal funding, because the money from the Michigan Transportation Fund "hasn't showed up."

She said the program at the top of the list for roads to get reinstated was the federal funding buyout, which allows county road commissions to trade federal funding to the state for 90 cents on the dollar in exchange for state funds.

"17 other states are going for it. We need to see our way to figure out how to get that back in Michigan," she said.

One of the fixes for the Michigan Transportation Fund that didn't quite pan out was the marijuana tax. A portion of pot sales was slated to help fund the roads, but it ended up funding about 2 percent of the state's transportation budget.

"It's now about two percent. It started out at one percent. It's a very sexy two percent, right? It gets a lot of attention, but in reality, it's not helping that much. That said every little bit helps," Donohue said.

She said life for county road agencies was pretty tough and there were some that were starting to head into contingency mode. The cuts have also made it harder to go after any aid.

In 2023, the Michigan Infrastructure Office (MIO) launched the Technical Assistance center to help connect local agencies with the federal funding meant to go to the local agencies.

Since that time, MIO Director Zachary **KOLODIN** said there has been an increase in locals asking for assistance.

Kolodin said many of the grants required matches to get the funding for programs like the Safe Streets, Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE), and the railroad crossing elimination program.

He said the program matches typically needed to be 20 percent of the total project cost, and they needed to come up with the money either from a local millage or through the state distribution of transportation or non-allocated funding.

"That depends on the program. Most federal programs require proof of match before the federal agency will seriously consider your application, but not all," he said.

Kolodin said the local road millages not only provided the funding to go after a larger sum of money, but also were used as a reliable source of community revenue.

"Any time a community invests in its infrastructure, it creates more opportunity for projects to move forward," Kolodin said.