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Population Report Veers From Road Funding Solutions

A specific proposal for solving Michigan's seemingly eternal road funding shortage, which [Governor Gretchen Whitmer](#) asked her Growing Michigan Together Council to produce, was notably absent from the council's otherwise detailed report on how to grow the state's population.

It further raises the question of how Whitmer will fulfill her top campaign promise from her first campaign for governor in 2018, to "fix the damn roads." The governor's 45-cent per gallon fuel tax increase of 2019 never got traction. The Republican-led Legislature and the governor never could find an agreement during the remaining three years of her first term.

During the governor's 2022 reelection campaign, she said her new tack on roads would be to appoint a stakeholder's group in 2023 to propose a long-term funding solution for the state's deteriorating roads. In 2020, Whitmer used the [State Transportation Commission](#) to sell \$3.5 billion in bonds to surge construction on state freeways and trunklines, but those funds will soon be exhausted, and they never helped locally controlled roads, which are in worse shape.

The governor's executive order creating the Growing Michigan Together Council instead lumped the road task force concept into the population strategy group. The executive order charged the council with proposing "long-term, sustainable and equitable funding solutions for Michigan's multimodal transportation systems and aging water infrastructure network to help meet the 2050 population goal identified in the report."

The report had details on the problem.

Michigan has the 47th highest percentage of national highway system miles in poor condition among the 50 states.

Among five peer states (Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, North Carolina and Washington state), Michigan ranks last in the percentage of bridges in poor condition.

The report warns that without more funds, the proportion of Michigan's paved roads in poor condition will rise from 33 percent in 2023 to 48 percent in 10 years.

The report also highlights the funding cliff about to hit Michigan's road system as the bond proceeds run out. Unless at least \$1 billion in new revenues is injected into the system, the percentage of state trunklines in good or fair condition will plummet from about 80 percent today to 42 percent by 2034.

These numbers are neither new nor surprising. Former Governor Rick Snyder's 21st Century Infrastructure Commission contained the same dire warnings in the mid-2010s. The 2015 road funding plan that raised the fuel tax and vehicle registration fees while also eventually redirecting \$600 million in income tax revenues that would have gone to the General Fund helped some.

But the problem has gotten worse. The 2016 report cited an annual \$2.2 billion road funding deficit. That new figure, the Growing Michigan Together Council says, is \$3.9 billion.

But instead of offering a detailed proposal, the commission largely punted.

"As vehicles become more fuel efficient, and Michiganders transition to hybrid and electric vehicles that rely less on gasoline, the State needs to examine alternative dedicated funding sources to maintain Michigan's road infrastructure, including vehicle miles traveled fees, tolling, and better utilization of public-private partnerships," the report says. "Our road infrastructure network will continue to be a liability to our future economic mobility until the state can identify a long-term, sustainable solution that properly maintains our roads and depends less on gasoline sales."

A message was left with the governor's press office seeking comment on her reaction to what the council's report said about roads, whether Whitmer would have liked to see a more detailed proposal and where she will go next.

Whitmer Press Secretary Stacey LaRouche responded with the same statement the governor issued accompanying the report's release.

"The Growing Michigan Together Council focused on actions we can take to grow our state's population and economy while protecting our quality of life and cost of living," Whitmer said in the statement. "I am grateful to the bipartisan members of the council and the workgroups for doing the hard work of tackling these big questions. In the months ahead, I look forward to reviewing the council's report in detail and working with my partners in the legislature on solutions to grow the economy and population. Our future is bright and I know we can keep getting things done to help anyone 'make it' in Michigan."

Rob Coppersmith, executive vice president of the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association, said he was glad the report highlighted the underfunding and condition of the state's roads. Coppersmith was a member of the council.

"It brings to light the problem yet again and hopefully we're in a position where people are going to open their ears to it now more than they have been," he said. "This is just a launching point. We've got to find out what's palatable to the general public. We've got to find out what's palatable to the Legislature. And we've got to find out what's palatable to our governor."

The council's overall charge to look at population trends and work with focus groups meant a lot of time spent listening. He was encouraged to hear young people talk of the importance of infrastructure.

"That process was a little ambitious I would say, but I would say it was still well done," he said. "But what I would say is it probably slowed down the meat and potatoes conversation on that kind of stuff."

It was an interesting process, Coppersmith said.

He said he anticipated infrastructure might take a back seat because of the way the council was constructed.

Asked if the report offered the kind of road funding solution he wanted, he said: "Would I have liked to have gone a little bit farther? Sure, but I'm not overly disappointed. It's MITA's job and other people's job to start this conversation."

– By Zach Gorchow

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