

Paying for aging roads

Vermont's roads and bridges are deteriorating, some to the point of being safety hazards; costs are increasing; and the state has to come up with the money.

Drivers and taxpayers are well aware of the problem: stalled road construction projects and a backlog of paving and bridge repairs without the funding to pay for them.

While there has been a much-needed flurry of work on Interstate 89, the Essex leg of the Circ Highway and other roads in the state this summer, the fact is the Transportation Agency cannot keep up with the demand of an aging system.

Today, a transportation committee holds its first meeting with a goal of charting a new course for legislators. The Transportation Infrastructure Funding Working Group will review the state's transportation needs, decide which projects deserve priority and brainstorm on different types of funding.

The committee has been asked to put forward a 10-year balanced budget for transportation. It seems impossible, and will require tough decisions. To meet all the pent-up demands for construction and maintenance, the state's annual \$360 million transportation budget might have to increase by nearly \$100 million a year, analysts say.

It hasn't helped that a federal highway bill, co-written by Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., has been held up in Congress. Vermont Transportation Secretary Patricia McDonald said the state passed its FY05 budget based on receiving a conservative \$133 million in federal highway funds -- a \$7 million increase over current levels. While that federal funding is in limbo, state highways and bridges continue to decline.

Jeffords has said the bill would bring more than \$1 billion over six years to Vermont, where there are 36 structurally deficient bridges on the Interstates and 524 structurally deficient bridges elsewhere.

Vermont needs this money and our congressional and state leaders must continue to fight for it.

Vermont, like other cold-weather states, is struggling with patching up a crumbling infrastructure, but it is also trying to move forward to integrate all modes of transportation such as air, rail and public transit. The transportation committee will be given the full picture -- from culverts to regional transit proposals --and members must decide what to fund and how.

Treasurer Jeb Spaulding, a member of the committee, has suggested some innovative funding alternatives, including GARVEE (Grant Anticipation Revenue Vehicle) bonds. These bonds would allow the state to borrow on money it expects to receive from the federal government in future years. The program enables states to make improvements to their roads and lessen the time needed to finish repair projects.

Another possibility is to dedicate all funds generated by the gas tax and other motor vehicle fees to transportation projects, rather than divert millions of dollars a year to other state needs. The Vermont League of Cities and Towns, which notes that local governments maintain 80 percent of Vermont's roads, has been pushing the Legislature to reduce the percentage of non-transportation-related expenditures from the transportation fund.

Patience is wearing thin on Vermont's bumpy roads and decaying bridges, but like the state's limited transportation dollars, most Vermonters have tight budgets and wouldn't take kindly to new taxes or tolls.

As this committee meets and prepares recommendations for legislators, it would do well to rely on such traditional Vermont traits as frugality, ingenuity and common sense.