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\$70 million gap means rough roads ahead

MONTPELIER — The Agency of Transportation earlier this year condemned the Thompson Hill Bridge in Northfield, but it offered the town no financial help to fix it, even though the repair qualifies for 80 percent state funding.

The 29-foot, wood-and-steel structure crosses Stony Brook and had a crumbling deck and abutments that were in danger of washing away. Fixing the bridge so nearby residents could safely access their homes cost the town \$15,000.

"It reached the point we had to put our own money into it," said Charlie Morse, Northfield's town manager. "There is a point where you have to swallow the pill and protect the traveling public."

The 95-foot steel bridge over East Poultney Gorge faces similar issues, but its condition is not as dire. Cars can safely cross, but deck and abutment problems have forced the town to lower the truss bridge's maximum weight load from 40,000 pounds to 18,000 pounds, which excludes large trucks.

Fixing the problems, including widening the bridge so vehicles can pass with optimum safety, will cost about \$1 million. The state does not have the money, and the expense is too much for the town to bear on its own.

"We just downgraded the bridge so no trucks can go over it," said Jonas Rosenthal, Poultney's town manager. "I haven't had conversations with the Agency of Transportation in some time, because I know it's not going anywhere."

Bridges are deteriorating across Vermont, and the state is not coming to the rescue. About 15 percent of Vermont's nearly 4,000 bridges are considered "structurally deficient." Fixing them all, transportation officials estimate, would cost almost \$800 million. The state budgeted just \$49 million for bridge repair this year.

Unless more money is spent each year repairing Vermont's highway system, the state will amass a half-billion-dollar backlog of projects by the year 2010. The size of that backlog worries lawmakers, who fear that if the state falls that far behind, work crews will never catch up.

"The solution requires new revenue or an adjustment of existing revenue," said Rep. Michael Obuchowski, D-Rockingham, a member of the House Transportation Committee. "The possible solutions are not pleasant politically."

The state annually spends about \$360 million on transportation-related initiatives. But bridge and road repair account for just 33 percent of the total as the state also plows roads, maintains airports, services rail beds and funds public transportation.

State officials believe an additional \$70 million is needed annually to maintain the state's highway system properly. But out on the campaign road, discussion about those daunting numbers is rarely heard.

Fixing Vermont's crumbling roads and deteriorating bridges has become a crisis situation, said Sen. Phil Scott, R-Washington, who sits on the Senate Transportation Committee.

Vermont spends an average of \$62 million annually on large highway projects, including the Bennington Bypass and the widening of Route 7 between Shelburne and Burlington, Scott said. But to pay for those expensive projects, nearly every town must let smaller projects slide, he said.

Few politicians on the campaign trail, including Vermont's gubernatorial candidates, are talking about it, he said.

"Everyone is talking about health care and things of that nature, including permit reform," Scott said. "But nobody is talking about transportation (which) I think is critical because it just never gets any better. I feel we are losing ground every day."

According to state officials, Vermont had two major highway and bridge building booms. The first took place almost 80 years ago after the devastating flood of 1927, and the second happened more than four years ago during the late 1950s and early 1960s when the federal government built the Eisenhower interstate system.

Forty- and 80-year junctures are critical points in the lifespan of roads and bridges, transportation officials said. Major reconstruction work is generally required after 40 years to extend a road or bridge's lifespan. After 80 years, deterioration is usually so severe that replacement is necessary, they said.

Officials say the state is now at another critical juncture.

"We are old and getting older," said Dave Scott, director of project development for the Agency of Transportation. Some bridges and roads "are having their midlife crisis, while others are at old age."

Republican Gov. James Douglas and his Democratic opponent, Burlington Mayor Peter Clavelle, have very different approaches to the state's infrastructure challenge.

Clavelle said Vermont is experiencing a "meltdown of the state's transportation budget," while Douglas said his administration has made "some real progress" toward addressing the issue.

The state last year increased its paving budget 50 percent from \$22 million to \$33 million, which has improved Vermont roads, Douglas contends.

More money is still needed — transportation agency officials believe \$80 million annually is needed to pave roads — which is why the administration plans to convene a committee of lawmakers, transportation officials and private citizens to discuss ways more money can be added to the transportation budget, Douglas said.

"I don't have a recommendation at this point," Douglas said. "We need to know what the variables are, how urgent the needs are and what the options are."

The committee, which includes the chairs of the House and Senate transportation committees as well as Administration Secretary Michael Smith, is expected to meet about a half dozen times before the Legislature returns in January.

The committee's goal is to develop a bipartisan plan to improve funding that will have widespread support among lawmakers, Douglas said.

"It's important to achieve a consensus, because I don't want to have a fight with the Legislature on what to do," Douglas said. "It's important that we work together. Vermonters expect us to do that."

Clavelle says he has some answers. First, he said, the state should borrow money to help pay for multi-million-dollar highway projects such as the Bennington Bypass and Missisquoi Bridge reconstruction so more of the annual transportation budget can be used to shore up local bridges and roads.

"The big projects are sucking all the money out of the transportation budget," Clavelle said. "Coupled with adequate federal funding, bonds would significantly advance the transportation agenda."

The mayor's position is supported by Vermont's Democratic Treasurer Jeb Spaulding, who says the state can float \$100 million in Grant Anticipation Revenue Vehicles (so-called GARVEE bonds) to pay for new transportation initiatives.

GARVEE bonds differ from general obligation bonds in that they are paid back with future transportation money the state receives from the federal government and not the state's general fund.

Vermont annually receives about \$165 million in federal transportation aid and the bonds would in essence allow the state to access future federal funds immediately. The loan would be paid back over time using a small portion of new federal dollars each year.

"I'm going to push this hard," said Spaulding, who is a member of the governor's committee that will make recommendations to the Legislature.

Although borrowing money increases a new project's bottom line, Spaulding believes bonding will actually save money because expensive highway work will be completed faster, thereby negating costly inflationary factors.

"Projects get more and more expensive the longer it takes to build them," he said.

Bonding to help pay for new projects also frees up state general-fund money to maintain roads and bridges so they will not need expensive reconstruction down the line, Spaulding said.

Rep. Frank Mazur, R-South Burlington, chairman of the House Transportation Committee, agrees borrowing money is an option. But he says lawmakers must also consider reallocating to roads and bridges some of the \$80 million in transportation-related tax revenue that now goes to the general fund, including nearly \$30 million that annually helps fund education, he said.

"We have to look at that and make a decision if we can ratchet that back," Mazur said. Statewide property tax revenues "are coming in real well, so the time may be optimal to do more transportation projects with that money."

Administration Secretary Smith said the Douglas administration is not fond of that idea, but it is willing to consider weaning the state from using transportation-related revenue to fund programs other than education.

Smith, however, would not say how much the administration is willing to reallocate, leaving that up to the committee.

"The governor believes paving and bridge repair is critical," Smith said. "We have gotten behind the need to make that a priority, but we do have other priorities. ...We need to look at the whole picture when we bring a budget in."

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