

Michigan's roads won't fix themselves

June 14, 2010

Since flying cars remain the stuff of science magazines, Michigan needs a robust and well-maintained road network.

It doesn't have it. Nor does it seem to possess political leaders, in office or aspiring to it, who are capable of making the tough decisions to change that fact.

One such decision is to raise the state tax on fuel. It's a decision the Legislature has studiously avoided for years now - and one that the seven major candidates for governor show no appetite for, either.

This isn't about filling potholes. The Drive MI campaign, a long-running effort backed by a huge coalition of business, labor and professional interests, argues, "Michigan's comprehensive system of roads and bridges is the backbone of our economy, supporting 4 million workers and a gross state product of \$308 billion annually. Studies have shown that every \$1 in transportation spending generates \$2 in economic activity."

Gasoline tax revenue has fallen about \$100 million in a decade. Consequently, Michigan is not able to fully meet its share of the matching program that unlocks huge sums in federal dollars. At risk for the coming year is \$475 million in federal money. If Michigan can't come up with another \$85 million for transportation, those federal dollars go elsewhere.

The Republican-led Senate has scrambled into action, if not wisdom. The Senate's solution is to cannibalize other road accounts - snow-plowing, mowing, upkeep on welcome centers, money for infrastructure for economic development projects - to come up with the \$85 million.

Quite obviously, the Senate isn't engaged in creating good policy, but doing everything it can to avoid talking taxes. Even if the Senate plan goes through for the 2011 budget, what happens in 2012-2014? In those three years, based on general trends, the state Transportation Department expects Michigan to lose out on federal dollars to the tune of \$503 million, \$549 million and \$554 million respectively.

A new report by the Anderson Economic Group in East Lansing argues that the benefits gained by improved roads will far outweigh the costs borne by consumers via higher fuel taxes. This is not news. Legislators know all about it. They simply fear that voters will not believe it - and will wreak vengeance on any public servant who says yes to a higher tax.

But dancing through one more election does little for Michigan. Fuel-tax revenues are dipping due to fundamental changes (more fuel efficiency, different living patterns). Michigan can't throw fiscal gravel in this hole and call transportation policy fixed.

It is a time to lead. Will anyone in political life do so?

An LSJ editorial

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