



October 20, 2009

Road projects should be ending, but many are just beginning

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Drivers like Erik Kuszynski of Livonia are feeling crushed by the huge amount of roadwork starting later and lasting longer this year.

Orange barrels normally replaced by orange leaves on trees this time of year aren't going away, and it can be particularly brutal avoiding the barrage of weekend road closures and lane restrictions.

Credit or blame for the longer-than-usual construction season goes to the federal economic stimulus program, which has pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into state and local road projects with an emphasis on getting the work going quickly.

And since the funds arrived in midsummer and early fall, projects started later.

"You foolishly go out and try to get across town on a Saturday, and you end up going way out of your way," said Kuszynski, 40, an insurance salesman whose commute is vexed by a stimulus-funded, \$16-million bridge repair project on I-96 from Davison to Livernois in Detroit.

But the work is needed.

"It's a once-in-a-generation opportunity to secure these federal funds," said Michigan Department of Transportation spokesman Rob Morosi. "Nothing we're investing in is frivolous."

Road agencies pile on projects to make the most of funding

Susan Smiley of Warren thought she'd found a decent alternate for the frequent days when I-696 backs up and she bails off the freeway on her way to work in Farmington Hills.

She'd exit at Coolidge and take 10 Mile west. Then construction took over a stretch of that road, too, between Greenfield and Kenosha in Oak Park, thwarting her detour.

"I'm clenching my fist; I'm gritting my teeth," Smiley, membership manager for the Golf Association of Michigan, said. "I keep trying new routes. Nothing's great so far."

Projects on top of projects

The projects are part of the stampede of roadwork funded by federal economic stimulus money -- about

\$887 million statewide for this year and 2010 -- that has complicated commutes for Smiley and almost anyone else behind the wheel these days.

As a result of the stimulus money, the Michigan Department of Transportation and local road agencies have added dozens of projects to their to-do lists for this year and 2010. And many got under way in late summer or early fall, as opposed to early spring, with the mission to get so-called shovel-ready projects rolling quickly to jolt the economy.

The result: The volume of extra work so late in the year has been a surprise to drivers.

"While they don't like the disruption to their travel, they like the improvements to their roads," Bob Hoepfner, the Road Commission of Macomb County's highway engineer, said. "They were filled with potholes, and now they've got a nice, smooth riding surface."

MDOT said it received about \$643 million of the total road and bridge repair stimulus package from Washington, with the remainder divvied up among county and local road agencies struggling to keep up with road maintenance in a troubled economy that's eating away at state and federal road funding.

Possible choke points

Metro Detroit will get more than \$342 million in roadwork through the stimulus, aimed at helping to fix aging roads and bridges and creating or maintaining 25,000 jobs.

The work ranges from a \$50-million reconstruction and addition of a lane each way on M-59 between Crooks and Ryan roads -- a chronic choke point in Oakland and Macomb counties -- to resurfacing badly beat-up local roadways.

The Macomb County road commission already completed its first project: a \$915,000 resurfacing of 12 Mile from Palm Beach to Hoover in Warren. Wayne County is now resurfacing Warren Road between Inkster and Beech Daly in Dearborn Heights for \$1.1 million. And Oakland County is repaving segments of Orchard Lake Road in Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield for about \$2.2 million combined.

Detroit officials said they didn't have shovel-ready projects to get rolling quickly enough for this fall, so the city's \$23.5 million in stimulus funds will be used to resurface 29 miles of roads starting in 2010.

Pay now or really pay later

It's a lot of roadwork to handle, but Mike Nystrom, spokesman for the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association, or MITA, said the money available to keep the state's roads in good condition is far below what's needed, even with the stimulus.

"We are not getting any further ahead in terms of rebuilding and sustaining our system because we would have slipped to a much lower investment level without these stimulus dollars," Nystrom said.

The state forecasts a \$1.1-billion highway program for MDOT in 2011, according to MITA. That's a big drop from more than \$1.44 billion in 2010.

What's more, Michigan could lose \$600 million in federal funding in 2011 because the state will be short as much as \$100 million in money required for federal matching, primarily because revenue from state gas taxes and vehicle registrations is plummeting. If that happens, MDOT's total road and bridge program could drop to as little as \$477 million, Nystrom said.

The only solution, he said, will be new revenue sources, such as mileage-based taxes and toll roads, in addition to raising gas taxes and fees for vehicle registrations, a tough sell in this economy.

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Additional Facts

Where the barrels are

Here's a list of some of the larger projects funded through the federal stimulus program that are under way or planned for metro Detroit.

Regional

\$252.6 million for the Michigan Department of Transportation.

2009

- **Square Lake Road** from Telegraph to Woodward in Bloomfield Township, resurfacing through late November.
- **I-94 ramps** at Belleville and Haggerty roads in Wayne County, resurfacing through late November.
- **Gratiot** southbound from Cass to Sunnyview in Mt. Clemens, resurfacing through mid-November.

2009/2010

- **Southfield Freeway** from McNichols to Ford Road in Wayne County, resurfacing through July 2010.
- **Telegraph** northbound from Square Lake Road to Orchard Lake Road in Oakland County, season-long reconstruction.

Wayne County

\$24 million total -- \$16 million for the county road commission, with the remainder for cities.

2009

- **Warren Road** from Inkster to Beech Daly in Dearborn Heights, through November.

2010

- **Canton Center Road** from Palmer to Cherry Hill Road in Canton, reconstruction and widening to five lanes from two.
- **Middlebelt** from Cherry Hill Road to Warren Road in Garden City, repairs and resurfacing.
- **Goddard Extension Road** over Merriman in Romulus, bridge replacement.

Oakland County

\$25 million total -- \$13 million for the county road commission, with the remainder for cities.

2009

- **Crooks** between Equity and Big Beaver in Troy, resurfacing through Nov. 26.
- **Novi Road** between Grand River Avenue and 12 Mile in Novi, resurfacing through mid-November.
- **Orchard Lake Road** from 8 Mile to Grand River Avenue in Farmington Hills and Maple to Lone Pine in West Bloomfield, resurfacing through June 2010.

2010

- **John R** from 14 Mile to Maple in Troy, resurfacing.
- **Middlebelt** from 8 Mile to 11 Mile in Farmington Hills, resurfacing.
- **Opdyke** from South Boulevard to Auburn in the Pontiac area, resurfacing.
- **12 Mile** from Evergreen to Southfield Road in the Southfield area, resurfacing.

Macomb County

\$17.5 million total -- \$9.7 million for the county road commission, with the remainder for cities.

2009

- **Schoenherr** from 23 Mile to 24 Mile in Shelby Township, resurfacing through mid-November.
- **10 Mile** from Phlox to Hayes in Eastpointe, and from Lawrence to west city limits in Center Line, resurfacing through late November.

2010

- **14 Mile** from Mound to Van Dyke in Warren and Sterling Heights, and from Gratiot to Harper in Clinton Township, resurfacing.
- **Mound** from 23 Mile to 24 Mile in Shelby Township, resurfacing.

Detroit

\$23.5 million.

2010

- Streetscape upgrades on Michigan Avenue from Shelby to Griswold downtown, and on Monroe Street in Greektown.

Resurfacing of 29 miles of

roadway, including:

- **Van Dyke** from Jefferson to Mack.
 - **Wyoming** from the Lodge to McNichols.
 - **Schaefer** from I-96 to Lyndon.
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