

WAYNE COUNTY

Livengood: 'Fix the damn roads'? Not in this Whitmer budget plan

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Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's chance to make good on her 2018 campaign promise to "fix the damn roads" finally arrived Wednesday — and she mostly kicked that can down the proverbial pockmarked road.

Whitmer's 2024 fiscal year budget contained no bold new solutions for fixing what really ails Michigan's transportation infrastructure — the undeniable evidence that we've built a state that our current tax structure cannot support.

Instead, the Democratic governor boasted about debt-financed highway construction and the status quo for local roads without any new taxes, four years after proposing a 45-cents-per-gallon gas tax hike that she characterized at the time as a "real solution" to generate \$2.5 billion more annually for infrastructure.

Unless you live on the remote Keweenaw Peninsula, which gets the most money per driver for roads, the perilous conditions of some local roads is plainly obvious.

In Wayne County, just 13% of lane miles for local roads are rated in good condition, according to data from the Whitmer's state government.

In Macomb County, 50% of local roads were rated by engineers in bad condition. A decade ago, this figure was 44%, illustrating how hard it is for the county road department to keep up with crumbling infrastructure.

“Pretty much we’re either treading water or falling behind as far as road conditions are concerned,” said Bryan Santo, director of the Macomb County Department of Roads.

While Whitmer has injected \$3.5 billion into state highways through new state debt — the get-out-the-damn-credit-card approach — local road conditions are where the real crisis exists.

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And Whitmer's new budget plan does little to address crumbling local streets and county roads. Instead, the governor is leaning on President Joe Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, which even some fellow Democrats acknowledge is not a panacea.

"One of the discussions we've been having is with all of this infrastructure money, there really isn't. They're not making it to the local roads," Sen. Veronia Klinefelt, D-Eastpointe, said Tuesday at a committee hearing. "There's no plan for the local roads."

"And some of these local roads are returning to their natural state — and it's becoming a concern," Klinefelt added.

Klinefelt would know. She came to the Legislature this year from the county commission in Macomb County, where local leaders have been juggling growth in the northern suburbs requiring the widening of roads to handle more traffic with the needs of older suburbs south of Metro Parkway (16 Mile), where the pavement has gone to pot.

Macomb County has 376 lane miles of local roads rated in poor condition — more than double the number of roads deemed in good condition.

In any given year, Macomb County is able to repave less than 50 lane miles. What keeps catching up with Macomb County and other local roads around the state is while road officials focus limited resources on repaving the worst roads, pavement in fair condition that doesn't get preventative maintenance becomes pavement in poor condition.

Though state funding for roads is a record high on paper, the money isn't buying as much blacktop as it used to, Santo said.

"It'd be nice to get some new funding resources instead of playing the shell game with restructuring and pulling from other sources," Santo said.

Wayne County, Michigan's most populous county, has made little headway in the past decade in improving its road system.

"What we're trying to do is gradually increase our good condition roads," said Andrew Kandrevas, director of public services for Wayne County.

The data shows Wayne County's roads have gradually stayed the same.

In 2013, 11% of the county's 1,700 lane miles of road were rated in poor condition. At the end of the 2021, road construction season, the most recent data available shows 13% of Wayne County's roads are rated as good.

Instead of rebuilding roads so they last longer, Wayne County is chipping off the top three inches of asphalt and repaving "with an overlay to extend the life a road," Kandrevas said.

"We have no end to the list of projects that we need to work on," said Kandrevas, a former state lawmaker." It's just balancing the available money with what you're able to get done."

It's all Band-Aids while Lansing fiddles around with one-time infusions of cash.

Whitmer is running a state government that is sitting on a \$9.2 billion mountain of cash. And yet in her budget proposal Wednesday, very little of it was designated for roads.

"Long term, they could have spent all \$9 billion on roads and it wouldn't solve our problem for the next 30 years," said Lance Binoniemi, vice president of government affairs at the Michigan Infrastructure & Transportation Association, which represents road-building companies. "I don't think you can solve that in the budget. There's a lot of policy issues we have to solve too."

Without a new source of tax revenue for transportation infrastructure, the road builders group warns the state's road conditions are expected to begin declining after 2025 when Whitmer's five-year bond program ends.

Whitmer's budget proposed \$200 million for a one-time spend on rehabilitating or replacing state and local bridges. The other big increase in road spending in her budget is \$124.5 million to service the bonds on the debt her administration issued for highway projects in 2020. Because of rising interest rates, Michigan Department of Transportation now projects the interest on those \$3.5 billion in bonds to be \$2.5 billion over 25 years.

The budget proposed Wednesday also projects that MDOT's budget will be cut \$108 million in the 2025 fiscal year if no new revenue sources are dedicated to roads.

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Whitmer's first-term quest to fix Michigan's broken road-funding system was busted up by a Republican-controlled Legislature that rejected the governor's proposed 45-cent-per-gallon

gas tax hike and offered few alternative ideas. Whitmer's ill-fated plan wasn't just dead on arrival — it never even arrived as fellow Democrats were wary of putting their name on it.

Fast forward four years later, and Whitmer's opportunity to address the crisis on local roads finally arrived this week. Her fellow Democrats have a narrow majority in the Legislature, just enough to votes to do something bold to fix a funding model that relies on a dying source of funding — taxes on gasoline. Instead of proposing how electric vehicles should be taxed to pay their fair share for damaging roads, the governor proposed making the sale of EVs tax free.

When Whitmer was Senate minority leader and her job was to lead the faithful opposition against Gov. Rick Snyder's agenda, she would criticize the governor's spending priorities and timidity to level with fellow Republicans about the true infrastructure crisis brewing in this state.

A budget is a set of priorities, Whitmer would say, quoting a worn-out Lansing saying.

This year, Whitmer's budget proposal didn't prioritize Michigan's *damned* local roads.

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