

Issue: MI Infrastructure

Transportation Infrastructure in Michigan

Summary

When Gov. Whitmer ran for Governor in 2018, she campaigned using the slogan “Fix the Damn Roads”—a mantra that resonated with millions of Michiganders across the state.¹ Her campaign slogan was particularly apt, as Michigan’s roads, bridges, railroads, and public transit system have been chronically underfunded and in need of immediate repair for years. As a direct result of Michigan’s pothole- and sinkhole-ridden roads, Michiganders pay an average of \$648 a year to fix their cars.² This is no surprise since 39% of Michigan’s roads are in poor condition and over 1,200 bridges are structurally deficient.³

The dismal state of Michigan’s transportation infrastructure, however, poses more than just economic risks; it also threatens lives. Since 2009, traffic fatalities in Michigan have increased by 22%—a frightening reality that the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) attributes to the state’s crumbling infrastructure.⁴

Although Democrats in the Legislature have attempted to appropriate and raise funds for improvements to transportation infrastructure, state Republicans have impeded much of the progress that Democrats could have made. Republicans have repeatedly rejected Democratic solutions and have proposed laughable budgets that appropriate only half of the money needed to address this urgent issue. Democrats must win back the Legislature because the longer that Michigan Republicans keep infrastructure underfunded and poorly maintained, the more expensive and more burdensome it will be to correct the damage.

Current State of Infrastructure

In 2018, the ASCE graded Michigan’s infrastructure based on eight criteria: operation and maintenance, public safety, resilience, innovation, capacity, condition, funding, and future need. Michigan received an overall D+ ranking, defined as “poor, at risk.”⁵

Among the lowest rated, were:

Roads: D-

Michigan’s roads were specifically given the lowest rating in the ASCE’s 2018 report. Of Michigan’s more than 120,000 miles of paved roadway, 39% are in poor condition and 43% are in fair condition but still in need of regular maintenance.⁶ Nationally, Michigan is ranked 35th worst in congested roads in urbanized areas, 40th worst in rural interstate conditions, and 41st worst in urban interstate conditions.⁷ Roads throughout the state are filled with potholes, damaged or disappearing curbs, and sinkholes that pose a physical threat to drivers. In March of 2019, for example, a Michigan man in his truck at a KFC drive-through was trapped in a 15 foot-wide pothole for over an hour before a tow truck arrived to rescue him.⁸ In April 2019, a video of a 12-year-old Michigan boy filling potholes in his neighborhood went viral, shedding light on how Michigan residents have had to take this issue into their own hands.⁹

Bridges: C-

Michigan has roughly 11,156 bridges and 11% of those are structurally deficient.¹⁰ According to the Michigan Department of Transportation, if the Legislature continues its current funding mechanisms, over 50% of Michigan's bridges will be in poor condition by 2023.¹¹ Because of inadequate funding, many of Michigan's bridges are held up by temporary supports that have been deteriorating over time and are now becoming increasingly costly to maintain. In February of this year, a woman driving on U.S. 127 was injured when a chunk of concrete falling from the Barnes Road Bridge above her shattered the windshield of her car.¹² This bridge was rated as being in "fair" condition by the Michigan Department of Transportation, which is especially worrisome if one considers that over 43% of Michigan's roads are rated even lower, as being in "poor condition."¹³

Transit: C-

Every year, Michigan's 78 public transit agencies provide nearly 88.4 million trips around the state, but there is still much to be improved.¹⁴ Between 2014 and 2016, the percentage of rural and specialized fleets deemed past their useful lives jumped from 15% to 35%.¹⁵ Similarly, in 2016, approximately 45% of transit agencies reported the need to replace at least a few of their vehicles in urban areas.¹⁶ The negative effects of Michigan's ineffective public transit have fallen disproportionately on rural Michiganders, who must travel significant distances to reach the nearest public transit stop. This is particularly apparent in the Upper Peninsula, home to over 300,000 people.¹⁷ While Michigan has some rural county public transit systems, more must be done to establish transit lines that connect Michiganders across county lines, allowing rural residents to safely and quickly access job opportunities, medical care, and higher education elsewhere in the state.

Rail: C-

A safe and functioning rail system has been and continues to be essential to commerce in Michigan, as Michigan's railroads transport \$194 billion in commodities, such as coal, agricultural products, and transportation equipment. One staggering fact about Michigan's rail system is that 24 of the trestles on Michigan's publicly-owned railroads are functionally deficient.¹⁸ Additionally, according to federal freight forecasting models, there will be 50% growth in tonnage for freight trains by 2030.¹⁹ The ASCE anticipates that this rapid increase in the weight of freight trains will require a new intermodal freight terminal in Detroit.²⁰ However, current public funding is insufficient to underwrite such an ambitious yet necessary project. Lawmakers must address the current rail issues and anticipate future needs so that they can reduce the harm that will undoubtedly be done to businesses that rely heavily on rail.

Impact of Failing Infrastructure

Escalating Costs

In a study conducted by TRIP, a national transportation research group, the average American driver pays \$599 annually to fix their vehicles because of failing infrastructure.²¹ These costs include coverage for wear and tear caused by deteriorating roads, vehicle depreciation, and escalated fuel consumption. Statewide, Michigan drivers spend more than the average American fixing their cars because of failing infrastructure. Michigan drivers pay on average roughly \$648 annually to fix their cars, and unfortunately, these avoidable costs are even higher in larger, more populous parts of the state.²² For example, in the Detroit metro area, this number is even higher: \$824 annually.²³ Michigan

drivers should not be forced to take money out of their own pockets to pay for the failure of the Republican-controlled Legislature to address the issue of Michigan's crumbling infrastructure.

Injury and Death

Michigan's dilapidated infrastructure is not only costing Michiganders money, but it is also costing them their lives. Gov. Whitmer made infrastructure a cornerstone of her campaign because for years Michigan has not been able to keep traffic fatalities under control. In 2016, Michigan saw 980 fatalities in auto-related accidents—the highest number of traffic fatalities Michigan had seen in over 9 years.²⁴ Even though the number of miles Michigan residents travel on roads has increased only 3.3% since 2009, the number of traffic fatalities in Michigan has gone up 22%.²⁵ It is estimated that Michigan drivers collectively lose over \$3.81 billion per year in medical bills, legal services, travel delays, workplace costs, and lost productivity due to vehicle crashes.²⁶

Strain on Business

Every year, nearly \$520 billion in goods are transported across the state, and 78% of these materials are transported by truck.²⁷ Undoubtedly, safe and functioning roads and bridges are vital to ensuring that businesses are able to operate effectively both throughout the state and country-wide. Ensuring that Michigan's infrastructure is updated and maintained is also essential to guarantee that the state is capable of attracting new business. Unfortunately, Michigan's inadequate public transit has already cost the state lucrative business opportunities. In 2018, for example, Amazon conducted a national search for its second headquarters. Detroit was under serious consideration for a number of weeks but was ultimately not chosen, in part because of its lack of effective mass transit.²⁸ As a state still recovering from economic downturn, Michigan can no longer afford to miss out on these kinds of opportunities for commercial growth.

Infrastructure Funding

Background

It is no secret that Michigan faces an infrastructure problem because of its chronic underinvestment in infrastructure maintenance and repair. Nationally, Michigan ranks 33rd in spending per mile of state-owned roads.²⁹ Of all 50 states, Michigan is last in per-road and infrastructure spending.³⁰

Michigan's transportation system—including roads, bridges, rail, and transit—is funded via multiple streams of revenue. This funding primarily comes from a combination of federal and state user fees which are required by the Michigan Transportation Fund (MTF). Revenue from fees on gasoline and diesel fuel makes up a third of this funding, while revenue from vehicle registrations and federal aid make up the other two thirds.³¹ Michigan currently faces issues of declining revenue from state user fees, however. In 2002, \$939 million in revenue from motor-fuel taxes was collected but by 2016 this number dropped to \$850 million.³² This rapid decline has been attributed to improvements made in the fuel efficiency of new vehicles. While lawmakers have attempted to increase registration fees and fuel taxes, the ASCE predicts that the revenue from these endeavors will not be enough to fully fund all of the work that needs to be done.³³

State funding for public transit also comes from advertisement sales, service contracts, millages (local property taxes), and revenues from fares.^{34,35} Funding for public transportation and rail also comes from the Comprehensive Transportation Fund (CTF). The CTF is an earmark of the MTF and thus is

funded in part by revenue from gas taxes and vehicle registrations. Revenue from the sales tax levied on automobile-related sales also goes straight to the CTF.³⁶ In addition, counties, cities, and villages can raise money to fund their roads through road millages, general taxes, and special assessment districts.³⁷

The Public Act 51 of 1951 consists of a formula that governs exactly how the MTF is allocated among the Michigan Department of Transportation, county road commissions, villages, townships, and cities.³⁸ Under Act 51, approximately 39% of the MTF is reserved for MDOT, 39% for county road commissions, and 21% for cities and villages.³⁹ Act 51 has come under recent scrutiny, however, as residents have argued that this formula does not adequately allocate money to the counties, cities, and villages that need the funding most. Currently, counties, cities, and villages receive money based on population and road mileage. However, the formula does not differentiate between wide, urban roads with multiple lanes and long country roads. Thus, rural counties with higher numbers of road mileage yet low vehicle traffic end up receiving large amounts of funding while urban, well-traveled roads desperately in need of repair remain underfunded.⁴⁰

Republican-Led Setbacks

Even with the obvious issues concerning the funding of Michigan's infrastructure, Republicans in the Legislature have failed to reform the funding mechanism and allocate the funds necessary to fix the damage. In 2015, Gov. Snyder passed a \$1.2 billion bill calling for \$600 million to be added each year to fix roads.⁴¹ Although this legislation may have appeared to be a step in the right direction, the amount of money allocated for infrastructure was nowhere near enough. Almost a year after passing the package, Gov. Snyder realized that the issue of infrastructure was only getting worse, so he issued Executive Order No. 2016-5 calling for the establishment of the 21st Century Infrastructure Commission, a group of leaders tasked with studying and proposing solutions to Michigan's failing infrastructure.⁴² In its 2016 report, the Commission found that Michigan would need an additional \$2.7 billion per year to repair and update the state's transportation adequately (i.e. roads, bridges, and public transit).⁴³

Despite this significant investment gap, Republicans in the legislature took few proactive steps to innovate and find new sources of funding. Instead, Republicans passed and Gov. Snyder signed two supplemental appropriations bills (HB 4991 and SB 601), directing an additional \$114 million for roads at the state and local levels.⁴⁴ These bills were incredibly harmful because Republicans raised the \$114 million by diverting income tax revenue normally reserved for the School Aid Fund. Democrats in the House opposed this legislation, citing that Detroit Public Schools would lose \$10.6 million in funding, while Utica Community Schools, Ann Arbor Schools, and Plymouth-Canton Community Schools would lose \$5.8 million, \$3.7 million, and \$3.7 million in funding, respectively.⁴⁵ Michigan schools are already chronically underfunded, and Michigan students should not have to pay for failed Republican leadership. It is time that Democrats win back the Legislature to improve infrastructure without raiding the school budget.

While putting together the FY 2020 budget, Gov. Whitmer outlined her Fixing Michigan Roads Program. She proposed a real solution to closing the \$2.7 billion infrastructure investment gap by putting forth a budget calling for a \$0.45 per gallon increase in the state gas tax.⁴⁶ Through this mechanism, the Governor's Fixing Michigan Roads Program was poised to raise \$1.9 billion in funding for Michigan roads.⁴⁷ Although this money could have been used to drastically revamp Michigan's infrastructure, Republicans killed Whitmer's budget, forcing her to pivot and come up with a new and innovative funding mechanism.

Hopeful Future

Although Michigan's Republican leadership failed in large part to improve the state's infrastructure, Democrats have already begun devising and implementing smart, effective solutions. During her State of the State address in January 2020, Gov. Whitmer demonstrated her passionate commitment to "Fix the Damn Roads." She announced her initiative, Rebuilding Michigan, a project devised to raise \$3.5 billion in bonds to fund the rebuilding of Michigan roads.⁴⁸ \$3.5 billion is an unprecedented amount of money that will go directly towards 122 road projects, drastically improving Michigan's infrastructure by enabling state roads to be rebuilt rather than simply patched up.⁴⁹ Rebuilding roads will also save the state money over time, since refilling and repaving roads merely defers future problems, costing the state money for years to come. One of the ingenious aspects of Gov. Whitmer's plan is that its implementation does not require the support of the Republican-controlled Legislature. The Michigan Transportation Commission has the power to issue state bonds without legislative approval, allowing Gov. Whitmer to achieve her infrastructure agenda despite Republican inaction and disapproval.⁵⁰ Her innovative and creative plan demonstrates just how effective Democratic leadership can be.

Republicans in the Legislature have already attempted to inhibit any real progress. In March, Republicans introduced SB 716 which if passed would prevent the Transportation Commission from issuing bonds or borrowing money in excess of \$100 million annually unless the Commission gives the Michigan House and Senate 30 days' notice.⁵¹ The bill, which passed in the Senate and now awaits introduction in the House, is an unnecessary piece of legislation designed to delay the Governor's ability to accomplish her agenda. However, Gov. Whitmer is moving ahead with her plan, following the advice of the Transportation Commission. She is working on securing the bonds in order to secure current low interest rates and begin work on Michigan's roads at the lowest price possible.⁵²

Gov. Whitmer recognizes that it will take more than one piece of legislation to remedy Michigan's infrastructure problem. With the help of Michigan Democrats, she is continuing to seek new revenue, address local disparities in road conditions, and search for innovative methods to make Michigan roads safer.^{53,54,55} The work is far from over, but Gov. Whitmer has shown the country that real, tangible change is possible with Democrats at the helm.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Democrats have made tremendous strides, Republicans in the Michigan Legislature have remained vigilantly committed to delaying progress and allowing the state's infrastructure problem to fester. The cost of fixing Michigan's infrastructure will only increase with time if no action is taken. Consequently, it is absolutely necessary that Democrats take back the Legislature and finally "Fix the Damn Roads."

-
- ¹ <https://www.gretchenwhitmer.com/issues/infrastructure/>
- ² <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2020-02-21/michigan-gov-gretchen-whitmer-refocuses-on-infrastructure>
- ³ https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FullReport-MI_2018-FINAL-1.pdf
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ <https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/man-trapped-after-massive-pothole-swallows-van-at-detroit-kfc>
- ⁹ <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/436832-12-year-old-michigan-kid-goes-viral-for-fixing-potholes>
- ¹⁰ https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FullReport-MI_2018-FINAL-1.pdf
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/2020/02/20/woman-hurt-after-concrete-ingham-county-bridge-goes-through-windshield/4819100002/>
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FullReport-MI_2018-FINAL-1.pdf
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdot/NCHRP20-6556RuralRegionalMobilityFinal_621559_7.pdf
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FullReport-MI_2018-FINAL-1.pdf
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2020-02-21/michigan-gov-gretchen-whitmer-refocuses-on-infrastructure>
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/gps-public-static/Gretchen-Whitmer/Whitmer_Policy_Infrastructure040218.pdf
- ²⁵ https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FullReport-MI_2018-FINAL-1.pdf
- ²⁶ https://tripnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TRIP_Fact_Sheet_MI.pdf
- ²⁷ https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FullReport-MI_2018-FINAL-1.pdf
- ²⁸ <https://www.craigslist.com/article/20180118/news/650376/detroit-misses-cut-for-amazon-hq2-over-talent-mass-transit>
- ²⁹ <https://michigandems.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/statewide-resolutions-packet.docx.pdf>
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ https://www.michigan.gov/mdot/0,4616,7-151-68212_64050_64074_64091---,00.html
- ³² https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FullReport-MI_2018-FINAL-1.pdf
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ https://www.michigan.gov/mdot/0,4616,7-151-68212_64050_64074_64091---,00.html
- ³⁵ https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FullReport-MI_2018-FINAL.pdf
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ <https://www.mackinac.org/archives/2018/s2018-10.pdf>
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/opinion/2019/03/14/opinion-public-act-51-road-funding-hurdle/3140813002/>
- ⁴⁰ <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/stateside-road-funding-disparities-dearborn-s-ramadan-nightlife-lack-women-public-art>
- ⁴¹ <https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/2015/11/10/gov-snyder-signs-12b-road-funding-package/75510548/>
- ⁴² https://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/EO_2016-5_516714_7.pdf
- ⁴³
- https://www.michigan.gov/documents/snyder/21st_Century_Infrastructure_Commission_Report_555079_7.pdf
- ⁴⁴ <https://www.mlive.com/news/2018/12/snyder-signs-13b-in-funding-for-roads-toxic-clean-ups-schools-and-more.html>
- ⁴⁵ <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2018/12/20/pending-budget-deal-shifting-school-aid/2378240002/>
- ⁴⁶ <https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2019/04/23/michigan-gas-tax-increase-2019/3550429002/>
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2020/01/29/whitmer-unveils-bonding-plan-boost-road-funding-3-5-billion/4601886002/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2020/01/whitmrs-35-billion-road-spending-plan-green-lighted-by-state-panel.html>

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ <http://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/2019-2020/billengrossed/Senate/pdf/2020-SEBS-0716.pdf>

⁵² <https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2020/03/gov-gretchen-whitmer-says-lawmakers-cant-stop-her-35b-road-bonding-plan.html>

⁵³ <https://www.ttnews.com/articles/michigan-gov-gretchen-whitmer-announces-partnership-mobileye>

⁵⁴ <https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2020/01/whitmrs-35-billion-road-spending-plan-green-lighted-by-state-panel.html>

⁵⁵ <https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/highways-win-local-streets-left-dust-whitmrs-35b-roads-plan>