

## Bumpy roads ahead?

By Jim Nowlan

Nothing is less sexy nor more important to our quality of life than the state of our infrastructure. Much of it, like water and sewer, is below ground and taken for granted. All of it wears out and needs maintenance and periodic rebuilding.

Take our local roads in Illinois, for example, which are about to begin crumbling. We need to come up with different ways of financing them.

Illinois is blessed with an extensive and diverse transportation network that includes 140,000 miles of roads and 26,400 bridges. We also have 2,300 miles of Interstate highways, more than any states but California and Texas.

Cities, counties and townships account for 124,000 miles of the state's roads and carry 40 percent of the traffic but receive only 22 percent of the state's transportation user fee revenues, according to Craig Fink, the highway engineer in DeWitt County and past president of his state organization.

Unfortunately, funding for our roads is stagnant or declining. We rely heavily on user fees such as an 18.5 cent federal and 19 cent per gallon state motor fuel tax (MFT) and various license fees; in the case of state MFT, the rate has not been increased since 1990.

The problem with MFT is that miles per gallon efficiency is improving rapidly and thus dollars raised decline as gasoline usage drops.

At the same time, the costs of maintaining and rebuilding roads have increased dramatically. As Rock Island County highway engineer John Massa notes, material costs have more than doubled in recent years, from \$35-40 a ton to place asphalt to \$75-80 a ton.

Fink says he and his county-level associates today have only 40 percent or less of the purchasing power they had in 2000 from their allocations of state MFT, which accounts for about 70 percent of their budgets.

LaSalle County engineer Lawrence Kinzer says funding for township bridge replacement has not changed since the 1970s. Back then he could rebuild five to six bridges a year, but now he is down to just one bridge annually.

The local roads people are often cutting back, from say 3-4 inches of asphalt repaving to as thin as 1¼ inches.

Others are just trying to keep up with preventive maintenance, as they lack any money for improvements in load-carrying capacity. This even though in 2009 the state increased truck weight limits from 73,000 to 80,000 pounds, which causes more wear and tear on their roads.

In 2009, the state enacted a five-year bond construction program for highways, college buildings and other non-transportation projects. Motor vehicle license fees were increased as were taxes on soft drinks, revenues from new video gaming and any increased lottery revenues.

As part of the bonding program, the state is to issue bonds of \$100 million a year for five years for local roads, theoretically to cover the increased costs imposed by the heavier trucks.

Unfortunately, many local road engineers have had to use the money for maintenance rather than for increased weight capacity. So we have funds from bonds that will take 20 years or more to repay going for projects that will last about six years. This is a terrible way to finance government.

Fink says the situation is so bad that many road officials are talking about going back to gravel and rock roads from paved ones, for lack of funds to keep the latter up.

“In more remote parts of the state,” predicts Fink, “township roads will go back to dirt paths.”

Illinois could increase the gas tax, as the base tax is low compared to most states. But that would be difficult because many local governments have added their own per gallon taxes; for example, Chicago adds 5 cents and overlying Cook County another 6 cents. Illinois also adds its sales tax on top of gasoline sales, though the money from that goes into the general fund and not for roads.

In the future, road taxes may be based on vehicle miles traveled rather than gallons of gas consumed. This could be done by annually reading odometers or even by installing GPS monitoring systems.

Increased use of tolls will probably be instituted on major highways. Many drivers in Chicagoland already have transponders in their vehicles that charge tolls without the necessity of stopping at toll booths.

American infrastructure is old for the most part. At the least, we have to maintain what we have. If we continue to dither, roads will begin crumbling, and then the costs of rebuilding roads multiply over those of maintaining them.