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Illinois highways wearing out fast

By Jim Nowlan

Illinois' transportation infrastructure—highways, interstates, mass transit, rail freight—is wearing out fast, yet state policymakers have no long-term plan for addressing the biggest asset the state has going for it.

Concrete is a dry topic (no sex scandals here), yet stick with me, please, for the issue is critical to the state's economic future.

We have arguably the richest network of arterial interstate highways in the nation. At 2,300 miles, we have more interstate miles than any states but California and Texas.

Chicagoland is the rail hub of the nation, as upwards of half of all intermodal freight movement in the nation flows through the Chicago region, and O'Hare continues to be one of the world's workhorse airports.

And of course the rich transportation infrastructure combines effectively with our location in the center of the country.

But few seem to care, as the infrastructure deteriorates badly.

“Bad” state highway miles are expected to increase from 2,000 last year to 5,000 (out of 16,000 total miles) in 2018. Much of the interstate system has reached its 50-year design life, which means that extremely expensive rebuilding rather than simple repaving is going to be required.

The mass transit system in metropolitan Chicago, which provides 2 million rides on a typical weekday, is rickety. Congestion chokes the freight railroads. It takes trains almost as long to get through Chicagoland as it does to travel from California to Chicago.

Deferring highway maintenance and repair is costly. According to the national association of state highway officials, \$1 spent on repairs while a road is in fair condition can prevent costs of \$6-14 dollar to rebuild the same highway once it has deteriorated.

Yet the 19-cent-a gallon state gas tax hasn't been raised since 1990, and its yield is declining, as drivers use fewer gallons in their fuel efficient and hybrid cars.

State policymakers lurch from 5-year plans to no plans for several years to yet another 5-year plan. The last capital construction plan ends in 2014. The plan has been backed by uncertain tax revenue from video poker, yet another new gaming program in Illinois, one that has been rejected by Chicago and many localities.

Maybe because highways aren't sexy, they appear to get little attention from policymakers. If we lose our edge in transportation, the state's sluggish economic growth will suffer even more.

We also need new approaches to funding the needed construction. The tax on gallons of fuel used is outdated, but will have to be continued into the near future. The tax should at least be adjusted for inflation.

The state should also calibrate motor vehicle registration fees to the value of the vehicle, which generally relates to the weight of the auto.

A business group called the Transportation for Illinois Coalition, which includes the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, has proposed that the 19 cent per gallon motor fuel tax be swapped for a tax of about 12 percent on the price of motor fuel.

The tax swap would add about \$1 billion a year to the present \$2.7 billion transportation budget.

The problem with such a tax is that fuel prices are highly volatile and have ranged from less than a buck a gallon to more than \$4 over the past decade.

Another approach, used at present on our toll roads, is to charge per vehicle mile traveled. I have a transponder on my windshield, and when I pass under a toll highway monitor I am automatically charged so much from my tollway account for that stretch of road.

This is the future of transportation revenue collection, according to Randy Blankenhorn, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

A few years ago, Oregon conducted a trial of using global positioning satellites to collect information from the travel of each vehicle, and the trial showed it could be done—and without compromising one's privacy (as if we have any privacy left, which is fodder for another column).

Illinois policymakers need to focus on our great infrastructure advantage, develop long range plans for maintaining it, and find different ways of financing this expensive function of government.