

County roads are a problem - and more money is the solution

Web-posted Jul 25, 2006

EDITORIAL

If you went to the Web site offered in Sunday's commentary page article regarding Oakland County road woes, you already know the answer to the problem.

A committee of the Oakland County Business Roundtable is proposing to raise \$154.6 million annually to solve our increasing highway congestion problem.

The money would come from five sources - a 4-cent local gasoline and diesel tax increase; a one-half mill county property tax hike; a half percent local sales tax jump; a 20 percent vehicle registration fee increase; and a \$25 flat rate driver's license fee increase.

The committee that put this proposal together knows citizen approval is not a slam dunk. To complicate matters, authorization of local sales taxes would require statewide approval. Most of the rest couldn't go forward without legislative action in Lansing.

Before you start fussing too much about this proposed solution for our traffic dangers and frustrations, consider the fact that - by any standard - we're in this mess because we've tried to run our roads on the cheap for years.

We visit other states and wonder why their roads are better and blame it on incompetence here. The fact is, motorists there are and have been paying higher taxes, roughly a dime a gallon more, for example. The last time such taxes were raised in Michigan, the politicians, led by then-Gov. John Engler, knew the amount was too low but were fearful of voter reaction.

The Oakland County Business Roundtable seems to be saying it has little hope that state lawmakers will be braver than Engler was.

Residents and businesses in at least 33 of the 50 states pay higher roadbuilding and maintenance taxes and fees than we do in Michigan, and they have been for years.

As bad as the roads are overall in this state, Oakland County - Michigan's economic engine - sticks out like a sore thumb.

As was pointed out in the Sunday article, much of the county doesn't even have a grid system of streets and highways. One unhappy result is that tearing up M-24 (Lapeer Road) leaves motorists with no convenient alternative route.

We can blame some of that on our lakes, which we wouldn't trade for better roads under any circumstance. But that a group of business owners and executives is willing to call for a list of new Oakland County-specific taxes for fixing roads proves they're convinced they and everyone else would be money ahead if that job were done.

In other words, cramped access for shipments and deliveries - not to mention customers and employees - apparently is eroding profits. It's one thing to be frustrated by too much traffic. It's quite another to realize it's taking money out of your pocket.

That said, these proposals, in one form or another, have been around for a while. It's about time they are front and center, to be debated by a much larger group of players than those who crafted them, not only in terms of form but also of need.

THE OAKLAND PRESS