

# Bangor Daily News

Thursday September 22, 2011

## Maine's rough roads hurt our economy

By Ed Mazurek, Special to the BDN

It is never a good sign when a contest to find the worst road in Maine generates hundreds of photos and stories of collapsed bridges, failed culverts and gaping potholes.

While the contest launched by the Maine Better Transportation Association strikes a lighter tone, it sends a serious message about the state of our roads and the policies we must adopt to fix them.

A safe and strong transportation network is the foundation of a growing economy. Our small businesses rely on our roads and bridges to move their products across the state and our working people depend on them to get to their jobs. Problems with roads can damage our cars, block trucking routes, and — more seriously — cause fatalities.

Lawmakers cannot control Maine's tough weather conditions that harm our roads, yet we must prioritize funding to fix them. But this year Gov. Paul LePage and Republicans in the Legislature were more concerned about appeasing the "slash and burn" rhetoric of the far right than making sensible investments in our transportation system.

The highway budget that passed in June contains \$230 million less than the previous budget for capital improvements to highways and bridges. With no bond package and the elimination of the gas indexing tax, Republicans undercut our ability to fix our roads and improve our state's transportation system and prevented immediate job creation.

The shortsighted infrastructure policy is the worst I've seen in my years as a veteran member and former chairman of the Transportation Committee. While

Democrats voted without hesitation to support the budget to make sure that no one received a pink slip, I stood up in committee and in the House chamber to issue warnings against the cuts.

According to the Maine Better Transportation Association, the cuts in spending in the coming biennium mean Maine will reconstruct only 60-some miles out of more than 8,500 miles of state roads. At that rate, we are expecting those roads to last 280 years before we get a chance to fix them again.

TRIP, a national nonprofit agency that conducts research and tracks transportation issues across the country, released a report last month that examines roads and bridges throughout rural America. Maine was ranked 14th from the bottom for rural road conditions and 12th from the bottom for bridge conditions.

According to TRIP, 19 percent of the state's rural roads and 15 percent of all bridges were deemed deficient. An additional 36 percent of Maine's major rural roads were rated mediocre or fair, and an additional 15 percent of the state's rural bridges were functionally obsolete.

Of the 159 traffic-related fatalities that occurred in Maine in 2009, 137 were on rural, noninterstate roads, according to the report. Inadequate roadway safety design, longer emergency vehicle response times and the higher speeds traveled on rural roads are all factors that led to the higher traffic fatality rates.

The elimination of indexing for the gas tax means the Highway Fund will be short \$5 million in the next biennium. We index the fuel tax to keep up with increasing costs of materials to fix the roads. In most cases, if there has been

an increase, it has been less than a penny, often one-tenth or two-tenths of a cent.

Now Maine people will have to pay the price of this penny-wise, pound-foolish policy with car repair bills.

Worse, Republicans refused to consider a responsible bond package or even a federally backed bond package which would have helped improve our bridges, roads, ports and would have created jobs immediately. They held economic stimulus hostage.

We've gone back to our districts empty-handed, with no jobs package for the voters.

Bonds create jobs in the short term by improving our roads, rebuilding our classrooms and investing in Maine-based innovation. They also pave the way to future job creation by improving our infrastructure and expanding our economic potential for new and traditional Maine industries.

Republicans left those jobs on the table. Democrats will continue to call for a serious bond package in 2012 because we cannot afford to delay targeted investment in Maine's economy any longer.

Let's hope next year we can have a contest for the most improved road in Maine — not the worst.

*Ed Mazurek is the Democratic representative from Rockland and part of Owls Head. He is serving his fourth term in the state Legislature and is the lead House Democrat on the Transportation Committee.*