

MAINE TRAILS

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

By Thomas H. Martin, Jr., MBTA President

FALLING APART

A new report reinforces what we have known for a while: Maine's roads and bridges are failing and we need to do something about it

One story in this issue caught my eye, maybe because it was about how our roads and bridges are "falling behind." It is about a new report on Maine's transportation network by The Road Information Program (TRIP) released this October. "Falling Behind: The Condition and Funding of Maine's Roads, Highways & Bridges" (page 22).

TRIP tells us what so many of us in transportation already know – that Maine is losing ground in its battle to keep our roads paved and our bridges safe. The report goes one step further to say that if we don't do something soon, things will only get worse.

By failing to adequately fund transportation and make Maine's network of highways, roads and bridges efficient and safe, we risk having our economy fall behind. ("The Difference is Night and Day," a report released by the Maine Development Foundation in conjunction with the MBTA earlier this year, came to many of the same conclusions. You can download copies of both reports at www.mbtaonline.org).

Here in Maine, as we head into winter, a season when our roads and bridges take a particular beating, I am concerned that we are not just at danger of falling behind, but of falling apart. I say that because I know within 10 miles of Benton where my business is based, there are three bridges on the state Bridge Watch list and countless miles of state and local roads in need of reconstruction and repair. I also know, that as the snow starts to fall and the winter cycle of freeze-and-thaw begins, roads in Benton and across the state are going to literally fall apart – to crack and form potholes that grow bigger with each year

we fall further behind in our highway maintenance.

There is some good news in transportation these days. Question 6 did pass by a very strong margin – with a 65.4 percent YES vote. And working together, we helped defeat two critical voter referendums that had serious ramifications for transportation in Maine. Question 2, if passed would have cut the excise tax drastically; and Question 4, known as TABOR 2, would have severely hampered local and state efforts to fund transportation maintenance and improvements in the future.

Even with those successes and though the \$71.25 million transportation bond passed resoundingly – proving once again that Mainers place a high priority on transportation – the truth is, this is just a small down payment on the \$6.5 billion repair bill that is coming due.

That is how much MaineDOT estimates we will need to fix our aging bridges and repair and rebuild our state highways over the next 10 years. And right now, we expect to raise only half that much through existing funding sources – primarily the gas tax.

If we don't figure out where the other \$3 billion plus is to come from, transportation in Maine will not just fall behind, it will most certainly fall apart.

My fellow MBTA member Erik Wiberg recently put it best when he spoke at a news conference in support of Question 6, the transportation bond. "We can no longer afford to rely on patch and pray methods," said Wiberg.

"Patching and praying" is what we have been reduced to doing here in Maine – and across the nation – for several years now. We have done the best we can with the dwindling resources available for highways and bridges. We have cut budgets, found efficiencies and put countless projects on hold.

The growing backlog of roads that need to be reconstructed is almost criminal. They are costing us dearly – in increased maintenance costs on our vehicles, in longer shipping times required to get our products to market and in safety hazards faced by our families every day. We need solutions now – before our transportation systems fall even further apart.

In closing, I'd like to say thank you to all of our members who helped during the recent elections. By speaking to local groups, at news conferences, writing letters to the editor, phone banking and distributing payroll stuffers to those you work with, you helped to make a difference.

I look forward to seeing many of you at our annual Holiday Meeting at the Black Bear Inn in Bangor on Thursday, December 10. If you attend, you can meet some of our scholarship recipients who will be in attendance. This is a wonderful time of year, made so by the people we are privileged to share it with.

And don't forget! If you haven't yet bought your Super Raffle ticket yet, please call the MBTA office today. This is a great way to help Maine students pursue transportation-related degree programs, and you just might win a \$7,000 vacation, as well.