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What Should Be Done With 'Bad Roads'

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By **Lee Burnett, Freelance Writer**

Milton Mills Road in western York County heaved up its innards in spectacular fashion this winter. It was impossible to negotiate some sections at speeds faster than a crawl. In one place, drivers even veered wide of the shoulder and into a field.

"It's a disaster, a true disaster," said Bernard Yeaton, road commissioner in the southern end of Acton, who has fielded his share of complaints.

The disaster was to get the usual band-aid treatment. After the frost heaves had dried out, potholes were to be patched. In two years, the state is scheduled to lay down a "maintenance paving" of a three-quarter-inch layer of asphalt. "It doesn't fix the problem," says Mark Guimont of the Maine Department of Transportation's field office in Scarborough. Within a few years, the road will be cracked up and crumbling again.

The problem is that the Milton Mills Road – like most of the 22,000 miles of public roads in Maine – was built back in the buggy days when roads were built right over ledge, stone wall boulders, percolating springs and even tree stumps. Lacking an engineered foundation of deep, well-drained gravel, these roads are quickly smashed into peanut brittle by the twin ravages of frost and heavy trucks.

Reconstructing roads to modern standards is an expensive undertaking that few communities believe they can afford. So instead, communities play an endless game of catch-up, spending large sums of money to maintain roads that are forever falling apart.

Just the cost of paving a road comes in at \$25,000-\$40,000 per mile. Reconstruction costs about 10 times as much as paving.

"Most [communities] are in a Catch-22. They don't have enough money to reclaim roads, but it does absolutely no good to pave over a bad road," said Carl White, manager of quality control, research and development for Commercial Paving and Recycling in Scarborough. "They have to do something," he says. Doing something usually means spending money to make roads "black and looking new," rather than to make them "last for years," which may be a time in the future when the elected official "might not be around."

"It's horrible to watch," said White, who doesn't really blame anyone. "It's the reality of politics."

Good money after bad

The state is playing catch up as well.

In late November, Maine Department of Transportation announced the postponement of more than a quarter of the capital projects (\$130 million worth) scheduled in the two-year budget period that began last October 1.

The delays were precipitated by a double whammy of a new federal funding formula that backloads federal revenues to later years and spiking prices. (*China's booming economy and the Hurricane Katrina relief effort* are driving the demand for fuel, asphalt and steel.)

The delayed capital projects seemed to deepen the gloom surrounding the recent release of a report documenting Maine's flagging commitment to road investments. "Losing Ground" was issued in July 2005 by Maine Better Transportation Association. It found that highway funding – once equal in value to overall property

tax receipts and to the state's general fund – has fallen further and further behind and now stands at less than half the other primary revenue sources.

"Public investment in Maine's highway system peaked decades ago and yet growth in highway travel has accelerated," according to the report written by John Melrose, former commissioner of transportation and now a private consultant.

"The state continues to underfund highway improvements from year to year and relies too heavily on stopgap maintenance strategies, largely unaware of the flaws gathering in their highways and bridges," according to the report.

One result of the stopgap maintenance strategies: some 2,000 miles of state road (or nearly a quarter of the state's 8,500 miles of road) have to be posted against heavy trucks every year, causing detours and delays to any company shipping goods.

The report was supposed to be a wake-up call for a renewed commitment to roads. But the delays are making things worse. Nearly half of all state roads (3,600 out of 8,500 miles) are rated "deficient" and in need of reconstruction. Maine DOT had been proceeding on a schedule to rebuild 72 miles of road a year, a pace that would take more than 40 years to complete the job. The announced delays would have more than halved reconstruction to about 30 miles per year. At that rate it would take 120 years to complete the rebuilding of the state highway system. "Obviously, that doesn't work," said Melrose, who added. "There's a lot of discouragement."

And that's the good news.

"The vast majority" of the 14,000 miles of local roads are also deficient, according to Dale Doughty, assistant director of the bureau of planning at Maine DOT. And less money is being spent on local roads. While the state spends about \$400 million a year on its road network, local communities cumulatively spend about \$200 million a year on a much larger road network, according to Kate Dufour of the Maine Municipal Association.

It's ultimately about money. Maine Governor John Baldacci declared the delays "unacceptable" and appointed a bi-partisan working group to find a funding mechanism to hustle the delayed projects forward. The group recommended diverting \$30 million from other sources and borrowing the rest. The borrowing plan came under fire from legislative leaders and was unresolved at the time of writing.

Here's how a range of towns are proceeding on their own.

Union

The town is considering an ambitious reconstruction program to reduce future maintenance costs. *The town currently maintains 13 miles of gravel road and another 20 miles of substandard road. Only 17 miles of the 60 total miles have been properly constructed.*

"Maintenance is costing me a hellish amount of money," said Public Works Director Al Hutchins. The town doesn't own a gravel pit and pays \$10 a yard to have it delivered, he said. Gravel roads cost more to plow and sand in the winter than paved roads and keeping dust down in the summer with applications of calcium chloride is an expense not associated with paved roads, he said *"It's going to be less expensive for us in the long run to pave them,"* he said.

Hutchins and Town Manager Andrew Hart priced out the cost of bringing all dirt roads up to standard in preparation for paving – \$3.4 million – and went back to the drawing board. *"I don't expect we'd get too far with that,"* said Hutchins. Figures are being recalculated downward and a multi-year bonding package may be proposed next year or later. Hart thinks the bond might fly next year or the year after if they can limit the annual payment to \$300,000.

The town is budgeting \$215,000 this year for paving and reconstruction, which is up \$40,000 from last year. That will buy one mile of new pavement on a gravel road and several miles of new "wearing surface" on old pavement. *"I'm going to fall behind because of fuel prices and the*

cost of materials," said Hutchins. "I don't see a light at the end of the tunnel."

A road bond might be less expensive, said Hart.

"That's one reason we're looking at it," he said. "We're already up to \$215,000. It keeps increasing . . . the cost of fuel. I want to look into if it might be cheaper to bond it."

Stockton Springs

The town has just paid off an \$855,000 bond that it took out ten years ago to pave and reconstruct parts of 38 miles of road in town. There are no gravel roads in town. The town had raised \$110,000 a year for interest payments and spent another \$30,000-\$40,000 a year to maintain the newly paved roads. It wasn't quite enough, says Town Manager Joe Hayes, who rates the current condition of town roads at C+. "What I'm facing is playing catch-up real fast," said Hayes. The town should have spent \$50,000 or \$60,000 a year the last few years, he said.

His advice: If a town can't afford a reconstruction program, it should at least invest in a ditching and culvert replacement program to keep water off roads. He also suggests adopting "fair and defensible" impact fees to get developers to share in the cost of reconstructing roads.

West Paris

The town maintains 25 miles of road (about four miles are gravel). This year, the town is budgeting \$60,000 for paving and patching and another \$55,000 for culverts, grading and ditching. None is budgeted for reconstruction. When Road Foreman Bill Keach started working for the town 18 years ago, the \$35,000 budget covered the cost of coating about four miles of road with sand sealer, a treatment that has been discontinued for environmental reasons, he said. "Now, we might do a half mile, if we're lucky," he said. The overall condition of roads has "gotten worse" in the past 18 years, he said. "Mostly because of funding from the town. They might want to do more, but there's not the money," he said.

Bradford

The town of about 1,200 residents, north of Bangor, maintains 42 miles of road, more than a quarter of which are gravel. Only a few hundred feet of road in town need reconstruction, said Road Commissioner Carlene Oakes. This year, the town budgeted \$400,000 for a "skim coat" of pavement that might cover ten miles, she said. The last such treatment was about 8-10 years ago. The condition of roads has "generally gotten better" during Oakes' 30-plus year tenure, she said. She attends classes put on by MDOT's Local Roads Center and comes back with ideas that find favor with townspeople. "Once they see the results of trying it . . . it usually doesn't take too much convincing," she said.

Skowhegan

The Somerset County seat is more than halfway through a road reconstruction program that was started about a dozen years ago when nearly half the town's 93 miles of road needed reconstruction, said Greg Dore, public works director. The reconstruction program has not been fully funded. "We're in year seven of a ten-year plan that is twelve years old," he said. "We can't fund it some years because the prices keep going up... Whenever there's a budget crisis, it's the first thing cut." Still, the town spends \$130,000 a year on reconstruction and another \$100,000 on pavement overlay. "About forty percent of our roads are now excellent or just have cracks that need filling," said Dore. His advice if a town can't afford full reconstruction: apply dry cement to gravel to build up road foundation strength and use a layer of geotextile fabric to prevent gravel from getting clogged up with silt and clay. "Small towns might not be able to afford to add cement, but they can afford geotextile," he said.

Readfield

The town recently took out a \$700,000 road reconstruction and paving bond that it hopes to pay back in two years, according to Road Foreman Matt Dunn. Of the town's 28 miles of road, about 4.5 miles are "real bad," and another 18 miles need "grinding and repaving." About 5-6 miles have been reconstructed, he said. "The town of Readfield went out and spent a lot of money in the past three years trying to play catch up. Everything we've done in the past four or five years has paid for itself," said Dunn, whose philosophy is: "I don't like spending good money on bad roads. You can pave it and it looks nice, but in two or three years, it's all cracked. One of the things I've learned is: drainage, drainage, drainage. If you don't have good drainage, you don't have a road."

Rockport

Rockport's roads may currently be the envy of less affluent neighbors, but that wasn't always the case, says Steve Beveridge, the town's public works director for the past 19 years. When Beveridge was hired, "the roads were in terrible shape, as bad as any in the midcoast," he said. A former paving superintendent for a construction company, Beveridge said he was hired "to improve the roads." The town has generally followed the advice of engineering consultants Whitman & Howard, which recommended spending \$250,000-\$300,000 for 20 years. "If we did that, they said we'd have very good roads."

"The taxpayers have made big investments," said Beveridge. "The roads are noticeably better."

The condition of roads has improved in spite of increased traffic and in spite of an increase in total mileage from 43 miles to more than 60 miles. "We have had phenomenal growth – subdivisions, cul de sacs, dead-ends, on the side of mountains, through swamps, wherever they could build," said Beveridge. "Traffic volumes have increased by fifty percent."

Beveridge's advice to less affluent communities is to target money to visible improvements. "It's a lot easier to sell improvements if they can see them. If you spread your money too thin – straighten a curve here, replace two culverts there, nobody's happy, not even the guy doing the work, which is me," he said.

Saco

Recent changes in accounting standards now make it more difficult to hide deferred road maintenance. *The Government Accounting Standards Board's Statement 34* (so-called "gazbee 34") requires municipalities to inventory all town-owned assets (roads, sewers, streetlights, etc.) in order to set a monetary value on them and begin depreciating them. In 2001, Saco became one of the first communities to adopt the new standard and it led directly to a \$1.5 million investment in road improvements over three years, according to Finance Director Lisa Parker. "We went from having 39 percent of the roads falling below acceptable standards to now we have only two percent," Parker said in an interview last year. The investment will pay off in the long term. "If we stay on top of things, roads will never get where they need huge outlays to totally reconstruct them," she said.

Local Roads Center

A valuable resource for any community serious about road improvements is the Local Roads Center at Maine DOT, which provides training and technical assistance to municipal officials.

The first step toward improvement should be a road inventory with a priority plan and a commitment, said the Center's Director Peter Coughlan.

"Is there a plan in place or is it in the road commissioner's head or at the whim of the selectmen? A good majority of municipal officers don't know what they should know about road repair costs and philosophy," said Coughlan.

A common mistake is a "worst comes first" attitude, he said.

"That's absolutely backwards," he said. Good roads should be kept in good condition before spending money to upgrade bad roads, he said. "Bad roads eat up your budget real quick. They are the most costly ones. If you take the worst first, you expend big bucks on a few roads and the other ones get nothing."

Sealing cracks and improving drainage with proper ditching and culvert replacement, "can buy a lot of time."

"Then, plan for large expenses to fix up the worst roads," he said.

"The education level has increased," said Coughlan. "It's definitely getting better, people are smarter."

Coughlan said the sophistication at the local level is improving, but it doesn't compensate for weak funding.

"Most places aren't keeping their heads above water ... I'd have to say things are getting worse," said Coughlan, who usually drives back roads en route to destinations. "Some rich towns don't have to worry, but average towns simply do not have the money for even basic maintenance. It's getting worse and worse ... I know the pressure on local government, especially from the school side. Roads tend to be the first things cut."

The state has tried to direct more money to local road reconstruction by changing the Local Road Assistance Program, but it hasn't worked quite as well as planned.

Prior to 1999, communities received \$19.5 million a year in state road money, which could be used for almost any highway-related expense – snowplowing, replacing culverts, buying new equipment, according to Coughlan. The program has since been renamed Urban-Rural Initiative Program (URIP) and it requires state money to be spent only on capital projects – such as road reconstruction. The pot of money was also increased to a percentage of the state highway budget. (It's now about \$25 million a year.) The new program probably just changed the source of funding going to local road reconstruction rather than increasing the investment, said MMA's Dufour. URIP's biggest effect may be in stimulating reconstruction activity on "minor collectors," state roads so low on the priority list that Maine DOT has acknowledged it may never get to them. Under a new incentive, if a community spends URIP money on a minor collector then the state will match that money two times over, tripling the investment. There has been a noticeable improvement of conditions on minor collectors as a result of that incentive, Coughlan said.

As a minor collector, Milton Mills Road is eligible for matching money but the Town of Acton has always used its URIP funding (amounting to at least \$64,000) on local – rather than state – roads, according to Lorraine Yeaton, member of the board of selectmen. "We have never put any money into any state aid roads," said Yeaton. That may change. The town recently listed Milton Mills Road as a priority on a form the DOT sends out soliciting advice from municipalities on which roads to concentrate on. But the state's direct responsibility for Milton Mills extends only to maintenance. (The next scheduled maintenance paving comes in 2008 – the third time in 20 years that the state has spread a three-quarter inch layer of asphalt.) Maine DOT says reconstruction must come at the initiative of the town. "I don't know that that information has ever been imparted to the town," said Yeaton.