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COMMENTARY

## Signs point to long road to funding COMMENTARY R. Keith Hite

Pennsylvania's roads and bridges are crumbling and citizens are paying the price — literally and figuratively.

Literally, because a lack of adequate funding for road maintenance and repairs means residents need to live with the deteriorating infrastructure or pay to fix it through user fees (the gas tax) and local taxes due to the shortfall in gas tax revenue. And figuratively, because the aging infrastructure at best causes inconveniences and at worst endangers lives.

A recent report by the state's Transportation Funding and Reform Commission, "Investing in Our Future: Addressing Pennsylvania's Transportation Funding Crisis," only begins to acknowledge the problem. The title is somewhat misleading because the report focuses on mass transit rather than overall transportation funding. In fact, local roads and bridges merit less than one page in the 125-page document.

And yet, in many of the state's second-class townships, which are home to 44 percent of the state's population, road projects account for most of the budget. Municipalities must maintain 76,000 miles of the 120,000 miles of roads in the state and they do more than fill potholes. They must build, pave and repair roads; maintain bridges; remove snow and ice; maintain traffic signs and signals on local and state roads and minimize dust on dirt and gravel roads.

That means paying a road crew, purchasing and maintaining equipment and covering the skyrocketing cost of materials such as salt, antiskid, steel, concrete and oil-based products, such as asphalt.

It adds up quickly, and when residents don't want to pay higher taxes, the budget can only be stretched so far. There's no magic to it: Townships have to cut services or raise taxes. Local government cooperation, through councils of government or partnerships among neighboring municipalities, has helped boost purchasing power and decrease labor and equipment costs, but it doesn't close the gap between road needs and available funds.

Fortunately, local governments are not on their own -- they receive funding through a share of the state's gas tax — less than 14 percent — based on population and road mileage. The liquid fuels distribution to local governments is expected to be about \$330 million for 2007, but that won't begin to pay for the rising cost of constructing and maintaining local roads and bridges. The commission estimates that funding need at about \$1.5 billion.

When lawmakers introduced the gas tax in 1955, municipalities got about 20 percent of the pie. If the state increases the gas tax by 1 cent, as the commission recommends, municipalities would see no more than another \$65 million in liquid fuels funds and potentially less than that. Plus, since much of the increase would be allocated for state highways and bridges, local governments' share of liquid fuels funds would decrease to 12.7 percent.

The \$330 million that local governments are expected to receive for road and bridge projects this year pales in comparison to the \$845 million per year that the state invests to fund urban and other public transportation programs (a figure that would grow to about \$1.4 billion under the commission's proposal).

Another difference between local road and mass transit funding is this: Road monies are paid through the gas tax, which is commonly termed a "user fee," since the people who use the roads pay the tax. Much of the funding for mass transit, on the other hand, comes out of the state's general fund. Every taxpayer in the commonwealth helps pay that bill, even though 88 percent of their travel does not involve mass transit. (Ironically, mass transit runs on state and local roads but is exempt from paying the fuel taxes that help maintain them.)

Pennsylvania needs to look at the transportation funding crisis as a whole, rather than focusing on a single component such as mass transit. For that reason, local governments are urging lawmakers to recognize the importance of local roads and develop a dedicated, long-term, stable funding source to help keep them in good repair.

Today, everyone balks at adding even a penny or two to the gas tax. Alternatives include increasing the state's driver's license, vehicle registration, automotive title or license plate fee. As with the gas tax, these are "user fees," paid only by those who use the roads.

Without such a user fee, local governments will be forced to rely more on increased local property taxes — another hard sell to residents.

Our local roads and bridges connect communities, get our children to school, support commerce and allow emergency services personnel to reach people in need. One story of an ambulance that had to take the long way around because a road was closed due to erosion, or of a fuel oil truck that had no way to reach residents because of a reduced weight limit on a bridge, is one too many. Unfortunately, such

stories abound.

Pennsylvania's transportation funding is in crisis, and it requires more than just a shot in the arm of mass transit to recover. There is no easy answer, but there is also no question that without dedicated funding to maintain our local roads and bridges, we are placing not just our roads but also our residents in danger.

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