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My Turn: State needs long-term road plan

By Charlie Smith

There is no dispute that Vermont is behind by hundreds of millions of dollars on road and bridge repairs. Everyone agrees that deferred maintenance multiplies the ultimate cost to the taxpayers. The Snelling Center's extensive surveying strongly suggests that Vermonters want action to fix the roads and bridges, and they understand that action will require more money. By a large majority, they want the governor and Legislature to end the prolonged stalemate and reach a funding compromise that: 1) reclaims transportation money currently spent on general government; and 2) raises a comparable share of new revenue. Vermonters also said they favored bonding as part of a balanced, long-term, strategic funding plan.

After years of political gridlock, relief may be on the way. The economic stimulus package will pour \$125 million into transportation over the next two years; the Legislature is considering \$120 million in bonding and \$20 million in new fuel taxes to pay off the bonds. Of \$33 million in fuel tax that is siphoned each year to general government, the House has endorsed restoring about \$8 million to transportation over the next three years. All this new cash will be layered on top of base annual spending for road and bridge repairs of around \$118 million. It is vital that the governor, House and Senate come to an agreement that preserves the magnitude and balance of this funding program.

We need all this, and more. Road repairs are a basic responsibility of government that has been kicked forward for decades. Credit goes to House Transportation Committee Chairman Richard Westman for forcing us to face facts: 495 Vermont bridges are "structurally deficient"; 30 percent of our pavement is in very poor condition; and \$1 of preventive maintenance can avoid up to \$10 of replacement cost.

Yet something is still missing: a long-term plan. After decades of starvation budgets, transportation is headed for a three-year spending binge. Vermont's binge will coincide with the stimulus binges in every other state. "Shovel-ready" projects will get built ahead of projects with higher strategic importance. Our construction industry will suddenly have twice as much demand without enough equipment, project managers or trained work force for top performance. The price of steel for bridges and petroleum for blacktop will skyrocket. The risk of waste and inefficiency is high.

Instead, suppose the governor and Legislature shaped these resources into a seven-

year plan. The plan could start with a commitment to reclaim all of the \$33 million in diverted fuel tax revenue by 2016. Next, the plan might set long-term goals and priorities based on rigorous financial analysis. For efficiency, it could allow for contractors to plan work several seasons ahead; it could save costs with innovation around "design-and-build" contracts, the bundling of projects and more aggressive use of pre-cast concrete for bridges. We could explore forward purchases of construction commodities while world prices are low, and pre-commit on future bond issues to lock in low long-term rates before the next, inevitable round of inflation.

We are in the predicament of crumbling infrastructure because Vermont government is perpetually gripped by short-term thinking. Blame it on partisanship or one-year budget plans or two-year election cycles, our political leaders have a hard time planning ahead. This is apparent across all of state government; transportation is just one example. We are backing into the future rather than committing to and driving toward strategic goals. The huge coming investment in roads and bridges is critically important to Vermont's future prosperity. Strategic planning is essential to a long-term solution for our roads and bridges and for many other matters of importance to our state.

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