

Flint Journal Editorial: State must deal with deteriorating roads

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Flint Journal files | M. Scott Brauer
In 2007, construction markers line Pierson Road near the bridge over I-75. The advancing deterioration of Michigan roads poses a dismal choice: Either invest in repairs now, or end up paying more later. While drivers might curse the prevalence of construction barrels during this season, the state's Assessment Management Council advises that invisible "deferred maintenance" is what should be making us panic. The need for repairs on Michigan roads eligible for federal aid skyrocketed from \$3.68 billion in 2004 to \$6.64 billion in 2007. The longer we wait, the bigger the job. Those figures do not include local roads. For those roads, poor conditions increased from 10.8 percent in 2004 to 27.7 percent in 2007 statewide. Rather than increasing the gasoline tax, Gov. Jennifer Granholm is looking for justice from Washington, which has been returning to Michigan only 92 cents on each dollar the state sends in federal fuel taxes. Granholm hopes a more sympathetic national administration will take over next year, and respond by raising Michigan's portion to 95 cents. The extra \$40 million a year would contribute heavily toward a fix. But even if she prevails, greater federal justice doesn't address structural inequities within the state. Glaringly obvious is a need for parity on the diesel fuel tax, which is 15 cents on the gallon compared to 19 cents on gasoline. While the gap is sympathetically designed to help truckers, their heavy vehicles give roads the roughest beating. A more sensitive inequity has some transportation officials promoting an \$84 annual fee on owners of hybrid-electric vehicles. They note hybrids still cause wear and tear on roads in their electric mode allowing their owners to pay fewer taxes than gasoline-powered vehicles. As electric-powered vehicles grow more prevalent, this gap in responsibility will need to be addressed, but for the immediate future we need policies that promote -- not discourage -- conversion to "green" technology. That dilemma, however, seems simple compared to the vast effects of sprawl, which has strained local governments beyond capacity in the upkeep of roads under local care. One result is an increasing reversion to gravel roads, which offer the advantage of cheaper maintenance but are otherwise a nasty burden on autos and their drivers. Within Genesee County, local governments sometimes maintain blocks with fewer than five residences, while heavily trafficked urban streets go neglected. That's a high price we pay for allowing townships a free hand in planning that declines to take greater community need into account. But setting that inequity aright may pose the greatest political chestnut of all.