

Road impasse indicts Legislature's skill

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The Michigan Legislature is taking its talent for farce to "Monty Python" levels. It remains a possibility that the Legislature will fail to come up with a reasonable method to raise about \$85 million for road work, thereby unlocking \$475 million in additional federal aid.

Do lawmakers take hovercraft to the Capitol? That's the only way they can possibly not realize that Michigan needs lots of money for its transportation grid. Oh, and the state could benefit from some road construction jobs, too.

This problem has lingered for months - time lawmakers preferred to spend campaigning rather than working at the Capitol.

Before taking most of the summer off, the House and Senate each enacted their own plan for the \$85 million. The Democratic House said it would use general fund money, regardless of the fact that the general fund is in deficit. Republican critics, such as Rep. Paul Opsommer of DeWitt, have feasted on that point.

The Republican Senate's plan is more specific, if no more appealing. The Senate voted to raid existing highway programs. Nearly \$50 million would be stripped from maintenance and another \$26 million would be pulled from a fund designed to help build roads tied to economic development projects.

Back in May, a huge business-labor coalition advocating for a better transportation policy rightly labeled the Senate's plan a "rob Peter to pay Paul" affair. They argued that one of the cuts actually could hamper efforts to, you guessed it, gain other federal matching dollars.

The Drive MI campaign has for years been trying to explain to the Legislature that Michigan's system of road funding is inadequate. Fuel tax revenue is falling, which makes it impossible for the state to maximize federal matching dollars. With economic conditions uncertain and fuel economy figures rising, fuel tax revenue won't rebound. The coalition, therefore, argues for new funding, such as with an increase in the fuel-tax rate.

With the deadline to approve a 2011 state budget just a month away, the Senate strategy seems to be to argue that the late hour means only its plan remains viable. Left unsaid, of course, is why legislators chose not to work on a compromise in, say, June.

Also left unsaid: What does Michigan do next year when it finds itself short of the dollars needed to acquire all available federal help?

Not even this Legislature is inept enough to get to Oct. 1 without the money. Lawmakers will throw something together and congratulate themselves as they return to the campaign trail.

Voters shouldn't let them off that easy.

An LSJ editorial

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