

Portland Press Herald

Pandemic's impacts leave some Maine road projects in limbo

The Maine Department of Transportation's latest construction plan is clouded by uncertainties around funding and whether more drivers will return to the roads.

BY [EDWARD D. MURPHY](#) STAFF WRITER | 1.25.2021 | [CLICK HERE TO VIEW ONLINE.](#)

Maine's transportation planners are getting ready to work on construction and maintenance projects for 2021, but with a lot more questions than normal.

How will finances be affected by the coronavirus pandemic? Will traffic on Maine roads rebound as more people get vaccinated? When should the state Department of Transportation and its contractors schedule work to avoid inconveniencing commuters, residents and visitors?

The department has even coined a term for all the uncertainty: "business unusual."

MaineDOT Commissioner Bruce Van Note said his department had to be nimble to adjust to changes in 2020. Construction prices were originally so high that much of the work planned for last year was stretched out over two years.

Then, when the pandemic hit and traffic plummeted – often to half its normal level – the department found that it could change construction schedules to save money. Work done during the day is cheaper and usually more efficient, and some projects that were planned for the offseason could be done during warmer weather because the roads weren't as clogged.

The pandemic even helped put a lid on construction price increases, and a drought allowed the department to stretch the construction season into the fall.

"One thing we've learned is to stay agile," Van Note said when unveiling the department's latest three-year work plan.

The department said transportation needs in Maine "continue to far outpace available resources." **The pre-pandemic estimate of MaineDOT's unmet need was \$232 million**

per year, it said. That shortfall was calculated after assuming that state bonding of \$100 million or more would continue annually.

The economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic, including drops in traffic volumes and highway fund revenue, have only exacerbated MaineDOT's funding challenges, it said.

"In the short term, we must focus on defeating the virus, restoring our economy, helping Maine people and businesses in need, and addressing budget shortfalls," Van Note said. "In the long term, we have great opportunities to make a real difference for the people of Maine after we resolve the chronic funding challenges in our transportation system. By investing in transportation, we can move Maine forward."

Van Note said he expects legislators to send a \$150 million bond package to voters, and he is hoping the Biden administration's focus on rebuilding the country's infrastructure and getting the economy growing again will mean more federal aid for road work.

Last year, voters approved a \$100 million transportation bond package in July. Van Note said the earlier-than-usual vote – transportation bonds are more often on the November ballot – meant work could begin in 2020 and give the state economy a bit of a boost.

This year, some of the major projects planned for 2021 mean that drivers in southern Maine can expect to see work on two bridges carrying traffic on I-295 over Route 1 in Yarmouth, reconstruction of the Congress Square intersection in Portland, work on the Eastern Trail in Scarborough and improvements to the railroad siding and platform for Amtrak Downeaster rail service in Wells. Those four projects alone will cost more than \$54 million.

To help pay for that work, Van Note said he's hoping that driving will pick up, perhaps when people get vaccinated and feel the urge to get out after spending months at home. That would mean they would buy more gas, boosting the state's share of highway taxes built into the price of a gallon.

MaineDOT officials said the curtailment of driving means that revenues for the current two-year period, ending in June, are expected to drop by about \$30 million, or 4.4 percent, from the previous two years. That source of money is expected to partially recover in the 2021-2023 biennium, but will still remain below where it was four years ago, the department said.

Despite the funding uncertainty, MaineDOT's three-year plan still calls for continued improvement of the state's transportation network, Van Note said. That includes 166 bridge projects at an estimated cost of \$504 million, 100 miles of highway construction or repairs expected to cost \$212 million, more than 3,000 miles of paving at a cost of \$429 million, and nearly \$400 million for transit, aviation, freight rail, ferries, marine infrastructure and bicycle and pedestrian projects.

Also, the plan includes \$23 million for an Acadia Gateway Center project in Trenton, replacement of two state ferry vessels at a cost of more than \$19 million, and a dredge of Searsport Harbor.

But Van Note cautioned that any plans during these times can't be considered set in concrete.

"Anybody who claims to know what's going to happen either lacks humility or honesty, and I try to have both," he said.