



BY ARAM KALOUSDIAN

Editor's Note: The following guest editorial is provided by Eric S. Wilson, Road Commission for Oakland County commissioner.

RCOC Does Its Best

Unfortunately, when it comes to funding, we at the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) are not very sanguine.

This past winter took a tremendous financial toll on RCOC, further eroding an already tight budget battered by declining revenues. Despite this financial one-two punch, we will continue to get the critical work done. But make no mistake: Our level of service will be reduced.

The 2007-2008 winter was our most expensive on record, and our state road funding continues to decline.

The total cost of keeping the roads clear during the winter, including plowing, salting and grading, was \$12.04 million. The next most expensive winter in recent memory was 2004-2005, which cost RCOC \$9.42 million.

At the same time, the two main sources of road funding in Michigan, the state-collected gas tax and vehicle registration (license plate) fee, were both down for the first five months of fiscal year 2008 (October through February). Gas tax revenues were down 2.4 percent statewide, while vehicle registration fee revenues were down 2.7 percent.

State-collected road funds were down 1.5 percent in fiscal year 2007 as well after being essentially flat for the preceding eight years.

RCOC receives no revenues from property taxes and relies almost exclusively on the gas tax and vehicle registration fees for its operating expenses.

Given the sharp increase in winter maintenance costs and the decline in funding, as well as skyrocketing costs in virtually all of the materials needed to maintain roads (from fuel and asphalt to steel for sign posts and guardrails), RCOC must cut \$2 million from its current budget, though this number could be higher if funding continues to come in below projections.

Cuts have already been made, and others are expected. We have improved efficiency and productivity and reduced costs wherever possible. We currently have 18 vacant positions that we can't afford to fill. It's clear that we'll need a further reduction in workforce by September 30 – the end of our budget year – to balance our fiscal year 2008 budget. Hopefully we'll be able to reach the needed workforce reduction through attrition, as employees retire.

The impact of the reduced staff is particularly dramatic when you consider that RCOC, prior to these 18 positions being vacated, had only four more positions than we had in 1974. We have maintained a lean workforce.

We have already reduced roadwork due to our financial shortfall, such as asphalt resurfacing and concrete repairs to eliminate potholes. Unfortunately, the impact of this can be seen in the number of potholes we are experiencing this year. Now, with a reduced workforce, we will be forced to provide a lower level of winter maintenance next winter and less other routine road maintenance from now on.

In the face of our deteriorating infrastructure, I'm often asked why RCOC doesn't build roads to last longer. The reality is that the roads we build today are lasting longer than the roads we built in the past. In fact, we've dramatically improved our design standard over the last 20 years. The real problem is we simply can't reconstruct enough of the many roads that have outlived their design life.

Often, those asking this question will also ask why RCOC doesn't build roads to last 50 years as they do in Europe. The answer to this question is simple: funding. The average gas tax in Europe is between \$4 and \$5 per gallon. Michigan charges 19 cents per gallon in gas tax. We could rebuild an awful lot of roads with the revenue from \$4 in gas tax!

The bottom line is we must operate within the resources available to us. Those resources have been inadequate for years and have been declining for the last 18 months.

Michigan has ranked in the bottom 10 states in the nation in per capita state and local spending on roads for more than 40 years, and it shows. The truth is, we in Michigan don't pay as much as residents of many other states to maintain our roads. In other words, you get what you pay for. ■

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