

Roads: The worst is yet to come

By [JACK LESSENBERRY](#) • MAY 7, 2015

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Something odd happened the night before last, once it became clear that the sales tax amendment to fix the roads was headed for an overwhelming defeat. Everyone not in the Legislature began assuming the legislature would now fix this.

By morning, people were talking as if our lawmakers would now quickly pass either an increase in the gas tax to fix the roads or put a new “clean” sales tax amendment on the ballot.

Both options make a certain amount of sense, and getting this problem solved and behind us would make even more. Except ... we are dealing with the Michigan Legislature here, the same body that has refused to fix the roads for years.

We are talking about a group of lawmakers, none of whom have more than a few years’ experience, and many of whom have no intention of letting reality get in the way of ideology.

By the end of yesterday, it was clear that when it comes to fixing our roads, we are now in for the state policy equivalent of Vietnam: A lot of painful, slow and bloody fighting at a great cost with no victory in sight. Yes, the Legislature could fix this problem; fix it tomorrow, in a way that would be barely noticed after a week.

Raise the gas tax 20 cents a gallon and use it all for roads. That would make the most sense. Gasoline prices fluctuate all the time. The price of a gallon of gas is nearly two dollars less than it was a few years ago, and 70 cents more than it was few months ago.

After a very brief time, consumers would barely notice and the roads would be fixed.

But if common sense were a common thing, we wouldn’t be in the fix we are in.

Yesterday, new Speaker of the House Kevin Cotter said he wants to fix the roads mainly by using existing revenue. That would mean severe cuts to essential programs that have already been cut and cut again.

That’s what the last Speaker of the House, Jase Bolger, wanted to do. His plan to fix the roads would have taken nearly a billion dollars away from schools and local governments, something Governor Snyder found unacceptable.

Cotter said he wasn’t proposing to revive that plan, but it is hard to see where he could get that kind of money otherwise. Unless, that is, he wants to close all the state prisons and turn everybody loose.

Other legislators are talking about cutting off film credits and business development credits, but that’s the equivalent of looking for loose change in the sofa cushions to pay the mortgage. You cannot get the needed billions that way.

What I fear is a worst-case scenario where they end up cutting valuable programs enough to hurt them without generating anything like the amount of money needed to really fix the roads.

The vast majority of people hated Proposal 1.

But its defeat leaves us with one big negative. We've got a lot of other issues we need to tackle in this state, but for the foreseeable future, roads seem likely to continue to be the elephant that fills the room.

We can expect a long summer ahead.

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