CROSSROADS

QUARTERLY JOURNAL • County Road Association of Michigan • VOLUME 12, ISSUE 1



FALL **2026**

WHERE THE FUTURE TAKES HOLD

Van Buren County Road Commission embraces innovation while putting people and safety first

CRA™ County Road Association OF MICHIGAN

IN THIS ISSUE:

From the garage to Washington
MI snowplow issue sparks federal legislation pg. 15

Deer crashes meet data
Science takes aim at deer-vehicle collisions pg. 19

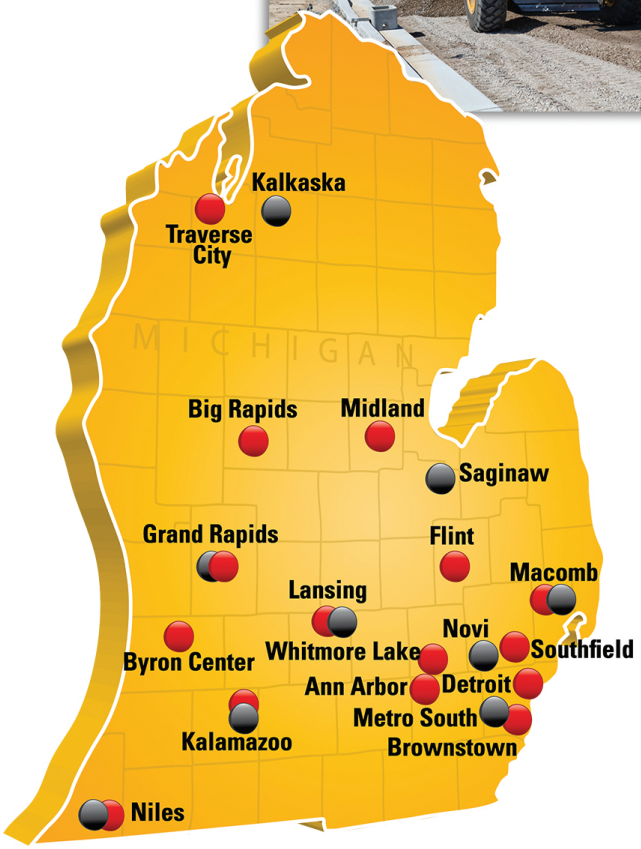


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ON THE COVER

Van Buren County Road Commission crews perform ditching work along a gravel road in Van Buren County. Photo provided by VBCRC.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

5 | **PRESIDENT'S CORNER**

7 | **MEMBER FEATURE**
VAN BUREN COUNTY
Where the future takes hold.

15 | **FROM THE GARAGE TO WASHINGTON**
MI snowplow issue sparks federal legislation.

19 | **TAKING AIM AT DEER CRASHES**
Science guides Kent County's response.

22 | **ROAD CONDUCTOR® HITS 250 JOBS**
One year of growth and innovation.

25 | **LEGISLATOR PROFILE**
A one-on-one with Rep. Pat Outman.

26 | **THANK YOU, CONTRIBUTORS!**
Recognizing our 2026 Roads+ supporters.

29 | **LEGAL ISSUES CORNER**
Procurement thresholds get a long-needed update.

31 | **AWARDS SPOTLIGHT**
Kalkaska CRC manager earns GLTPA honor.

33 | **EVENT CALENDAR**

35 | **CHANGING LANES**
Key transitions at...

36 | **COMMUNICATION CORNER**
Managing social media's ups and downs.

38 | **PUBLISHER'S COLUMN**
Ready, set … go fix those roads and bridges!



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PRESIDENT'S CORNER



Nearly five months into my presidency, like many of my predecessors, I have had the opportunity to attend several CRA District meetings across Michigan. Also like my predecessors, I come away from each one impressed.

This has been a particularly busy construction season, and the volume of work our agencies deliver every year is remarkable. But the work never stops.

As we turn our attention to budgeting for the year ahead, we must work to engage stakeholders and incorporate their feedback.

The first of the new road funding revenue is here! We are unlikely to have all the answers to the many questions surrounding it until the end of the fiscal year. Our townships and residents, understandably, want to know our plans now. We owe them the best answers we can offer, and we need a plan in hand as we begin preparing for the 2027 construction season.

Discussion at District meetings surrounding CRA's recent legislative accomplishments has also been robust. Among this year's legislative accomplishments is an increase in purchasing limits that had gone unchanged for decades. When you look at what we've accomplished legislatively through CRA over the past several years, it is incredible.

We are all so busy in our own counties – developing local relationships, improving roads and bridges – that we sometimes fail to appreciate what the CRA staff accomplishes daily. The information they provide to the Legislature keeps roads at the center of everyone's attention, and the educational programs they assemble are genuinely valuable to us. If you see Denise or anyone else on the CRA team, make sure you thank them for a job well done.



Casey Rice

I want to take a moment to honor the memory of **Branch County Road Commission's Casey Rice.** Casey was mowing in Branch County in June when he was struck and killed. His death is an all-too-familiar tragedy for road commissions across Michigan, and it should not be. We must continue working with MDOT to do everything we can to prevent tragedies like this in the future.

Scott A. Merillat

Scott Merillat, PE

CRA President

Managing Director,
Lenawee County Road Commission



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VBCRC crews install new drainage pipes along a gravel road.

MEMBER FEATURE

VAN BUREN COUNTY

Where the future takes hold

Van Buren County is one of Michigan's mid-1800s "cabinet counties," named for members of President Andrew Jackson's administration. Its namesake, Martin Van Buren, was Jackson's Secretary of State before becoming vice president and, later, president.

The county was officially organized in 1837, the same year Michigan gained statehood after settling the Toledo Strip dispute with Ohio. Ohio got the Toledo Strip, while Michigan got the Upper Peninsula. Michigan is generally viewed as the winner of that deal.

Today, Van Buren County's population hovers around 76,000, swelling in the summer as tourists from Chicago and elsewhere flock to its Lake Michigan shoreline and inland lakes. Tourism and agriculture are important industries, and the county also played a significant role in the Underground Railroad, along with neighboring Cass County.

More recently, President Van Buren's name has found a decidedly modern use. Van Buren County named its official artificial intelligence (AI) search engine "AI Marty," taking something from the county's past and making it an engine for the future.

A lasting commitment to safety

During a visit to the **Van Buren County Road Commission** (VBCRC), one of the first topics to come up was the agency's focus on employee safety.

In March 2023, a driver attempted an unsafe pass in an active VBCRC work zone, hitting another pickup before careening into and killing VBCRC road worker **Rene Rangel,** 58, who was holding a traffic control sign.

The 31-year-old driver was convicted and received a lengthy prison term. Rangel's death deeply affected the county road agency community and is still talked about today.

"That was my first week on the job, if you can imagine it. It was awful," said VBCRC managing director **Bret Witkowski.** "It was like a vigil here. People were walking around so upset. I mean, how could you not be affected by something like that? I don't ever want to get a call like that again."

Rene's death has not been forgotten, Witkowski said, pointing to a memorial and commemorative golf outing held in his honor.

"The second you let your guard down, that's all it takes," Witkowski said. "The reality is the public isn't paying attention. We need to take care of our people."

Whenever possible, VBCRC now closes roads while crews are working.

"We hardly have any flaggers anymore because that's the No. 1 safety issue, to keep our people out of harm's way," Witkowski said. If a road cannot be closed, a county Sheriff's vehicle is on the scene.

Other VBCRC safety efforts include:

- **Safety Committee.** Van Buren has prioritized its Safety Committee, which includes management, a safety coordinator, superintendents and operations representatives, both union and non-union. The committee meets monthly to discuss safe operations and equipment, concerns and possible solutions.

Continued on page 9

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VBCRC crews apply seal coat as part of the agency's road preservation program.

Safety Training Program. Every operations employee receives job-specific safety training. Training may come from experienced VBCRC staff or outside specialists, including Delta College for tree trimming and Michigan Technological University's Local Technical Assistance Program for road grader operations.

MUTCD. VBCRC follows the book when it comes to the Michigan Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, including "Road Work Begins" and "Road Work Ends" signs, lighted signals and other safety measures. Following the June 24, 2026, tragic death of **Branch County Road Commission** worker **Casey Rice** while mowing road right-of-way, VBCRC quickly added lights to its mowers to make them more visible.

MIOSHA grants. Van Buren is a frequent applicant for Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration MIWISH funds for worker safety. Recent grants helped purchase chainsaw pants, which are cooler and thinner than traditional chaps, and magnetic clip-on Bluetooth® "angel lights" visible for 100 feet to make road workers more visible.

Beacon lights. VBCRC started a flashing beacon light program about 20 years ago in partnership with townships. A township can request a beacon at an area perceived to need extra driver attention. VBCRC engineers review the location to confirm it is a good placement for the solar-powered beacon. If approved, VBCRC and the township enter into a 10-year agreement, with the township paying the costs. More than 30 of the lights are now in place and are very popular with the community.

Partners in progress

"We have something new to celebrate," Witkowski said. "In the August [2026] Primary Election, our 18th township approved a township-wide road millage. That means every township in Van Buren County has a road millage, and we have a countywide road millage and one special assessment district. We're very fortunate to have that!"

VBCRC's current funding situation is diverse and stable. Excluding federal aid, 58% of its budget comes from the Michigan Transportation Fund (MTF), 14% from the countywide millage and 27% from township millages. Townships appear to be recognizing that the 2025 Road Funding Package, including the Neighborhood Roads Fund, provides an opportunity to leverage local support and make significant progress.

Strong township relationships go beyond funding. Witkowski meets with every township at least once a year, listening to concerns and flexing where possible to address them.

"I like to take the issues off the table ahead of time," he said. "My job is to listen to them so that when my commissioners go to a night meeting, they're not a piñata. When I started night meetings,

Continued on page 11



A VBCRC crew tackles a sizable tree removal.

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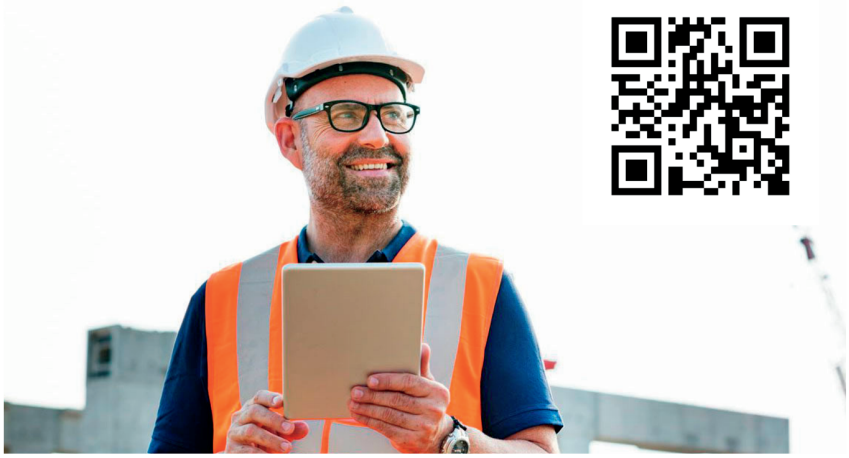
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VBCRC's "Lives Behind the Signs" campaign introduces the people behind the work.



I was a punching bag, but I didn't stop going. You just have to talk to people. So much can get lost through a text."

VBCRC road commissioners also serve as ambassadors at township meetings.

"Our residents, especially our farmers, appreciate that we exercise some discretion," said Commissioner **Wayne Nelson.** "Sometimes we have to go the extra mile … do the right thing, be flexible. As a road commissioner, you learn early and often to work with people and to have that mindset."

Growing leaders from within

"We're not the biggest county, but we've been fortunate to attract and grow good talent," Witkowski said.

Finance and Human Resources Director **Linnea Rader** has developed an internal program called "Big Picture Leadership." VBCRC currently has 13 people in the program, where staff learn that leadership isn't a title or position, but a mindset needed at every level of the road commission.

Continued on page 13



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VBCRC employees put their skills to the test at the agency's 2025 Road-eo.

"Whether they get promoted or not, they will be better employees having had training in leadership, what it means and how to engage in it," Rader said.

Embracing innovation

County road agencies have been stretching tight budgets for years, and VBCRC is no exception. Out on the road, the agency is increasing its use of double chip seal on gravel roads.

VBCRC's experience over the last six years shows that a gravel road treated with double chip seal requires no grading or additional gravel and develops fewer potholes.

In 2026, VBCRC crews improved 5.1 miles of unpaved roads with double chip seal after cutting trees and ditching to improve drainage.

"It performs like a paved road," Witkowski said. "This is our option for improving a gravel road that should remain gravel due to low ADT [average daily traffic]."

Van Buren is also mindful of keeping up with new technology and new ideas.

"We encourage active nonresistance to new ideas," Nelson quipped.

"I don't want to hear: 'That's how we always did it.' I hate that phrase," Witkowski said. "That may have gotten you success, but it won't keep you there."

Keeping the conversation open

That openness extends to social media, where VBCRC has built a following of more than 13,000 on Facebook with posts focused on county road news.

"We're very proud of our social media," Witkowski said.

The agency does not limit comments or what is shared, Rader said, in part because the feedback helps staff understand what residents want and need to know.

"If someone says something against us – and you'll always have that element – our supporters will usually set that person straight. I love when that happens!" Rader said. "If you don't have the comments turned on, you don't know what people are saying about you. Seeing the comments people leave lets us know what we should be educating about on social media."

When winter comes

For all the changes underway at VBCRC, one perennial challenge remains: Winter.

At times during a winter weather event, Van Buren County can essentially experience two storms: One on the west side near Lake Michigan and another on the east side, up to 30 miles away.

"We want to keep the roads safe for everyone. That's our mandate, but I worry if we can keep up with the magnitude of storms we've experienced lately," Witkowski said. **CRA**

JUST THE FACTS

Office Headquarters: **LAWRENCE**

66 full-time staff
5 seasonal, **4** apprentices

5 Commissioners *(appointed)*

MILES OF ROAD: 1,313

Total paved: **1,069 miles**
Primary: **345** Local: **724**

Total unpaved: **244 miles**
Primary: **2** Local: **242**

MDOT Contract: **No**

72 Bridges
+ 830 culverts

Annual Budget: **$31.5 M** *(FY 2026)*

Local Revenue: **$23.3 M** *(FY 2026)*

Annual Snowfall **82"**

VBCRC Established **1916**

Garages **3**

Office Built **2000**

FUN FACT: Times have certainly changed! From 1923 to 1930, VBCRC met just once a year, in January, to appoint the county highway engineer. In 1937, the road commission was buying gasoline by the 10,000-gallon rail carload for just 8¢ a gallon.

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FEATURE:

FROM THE GARAGE TO WASHINGTON

Chippewa County Road Commission snowplow de-rate troubles spark federal legislation

Last December, as severe snowstorms kept slamming the Upper Peninsula, **Chippewa County Road Commission** (CCRC) manager **Rob Laitinen** reached a boiling point: Some of CCRC's newest – and most expensive – snowplows were sitting out the storms in the mechanics' bays.

"It was just very, very frustrating to have multiple plow units down during those events," Laitinen said.

During one storm, eight of CCRC's 70 plow trucks were out of service. Six were sidelined due to problems with their new diesel emissions systems. "That's just not feasible," Laitinen said.

The breakdowns put added pressure on CCRC's mechanics, who were hustling to get trucks back on the road quickly. Sometimes that meant making what Laitinen called "band-aid type fixes" to get a truck out the door, knowing the underlying problem would likely return.

"We do have a few spares, but those get used up pretty quick," Laitinen said. "There's several times we had routes being covered with a grader rather than a truck."

When newer isn't better

Ironically, some of CCRC's oldest equipment is more reliable than its newer trucks in a winter storm. Take the road agency's 1945 Oshkosh snowblower. With mechanical systems and virtually no electronics, Laitinen said the 80-year-old machine is remarkably dependable.

"I could go out there today, push the button, and it'll fire up and run," he said.

When an emissions fault isn't corrected, newer trucks begin losing power, called de-rating. Laitinen said a truck's emissions system can reduce the truck's speed to just 5% – even if a blizzard is on.

"Basically, the truck can just idle on the shoulder," Laitinen said. "That's all it can do."

The push for a solution

Fully frustrated, Laitinen decided to take his concerns beyond CCRC. In February he wrote to the US Environmental Protection Agency and the White House, sending a copy of the letter to US Congressman Jack Bergman's office.

Continued on page 17



One of Chippewa County's new diesel engine snowplows.



An oldie, but goodie: CCRC's 1945 Oshkosh snowblower.

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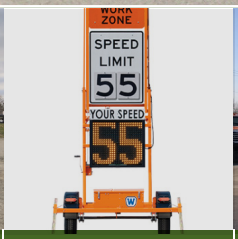
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"I never did receive anything back from the EPA, but I did get just a quick response from the White House saying they had received it and were considering it," Laitinen said.

Laitinen also shared the letter with the **UP Road Builders** and brought it to CRA's March Board meeting, where the issue gained broader attention among county road agencies.

The issue gained traction after **Mackinac County Road Commission** managing director **Dirk Heckman** discussed Laitinen's concerns with Michigan House Speaker Matt Hall, who connected the effort with Bergman's office. Bergman's staff then reached out to Laitinen for more information.

From problem to policy

During conversations with a truck manufacturer, Laitinen learned that emissions standards in California – which has perhaps the strictest environmental standards in the US – include an exception for fire, ambulance and snow removal equipment.

Laitinen said a similar exemption "just made sense" for Northern States, including Michigan.

Congressman Bergman got active and introduced the Protecting Lifesaving Operations during Winter Storms (PLOW Storms) Act in May. The legislation would provide an exemption from certain federal emissions requirements for qualifying snowplows and other emergency vehicles. Chippewa CRC and CRA submitted letters of support to the House.

Support for the effort has been growing among Michigan county road agencies, many of which are currently passing their own resolutions in support of the PLOW Storms Act.

"I have not heard of a road agency yet that is not supportive of the effort," Laitinen said.

CRA has prepared a resolution for members to use when additional advocacy is needed. As the bill moves closer to a vote, Laitinen expects a broader call to action.



> **"We need to get something codified in law so that we have some confidence moving forward."**
>
> *– Rob Laitinen, PS, CCRC manager*

Laitinen also encouraged road agencies experiencing similar emissions issues to share their experiences directly with their congressional representatives and Congressman Bergman's office, saying those letters could help keep the momentum going.

Looking for certainty

For now, county road agencies across Michigan are heading toward another winter without a permanent fix.

Laitinen said recent federal administrative actions could potentially allow agencies to modify the emissions systems without facing enforcement action. But without a change in law, he isn't willing to make that decision for CCRC.

A future Washington DC administration could reverse course, potentially forcing road agencies to spend money restoring equipment they had removed.

"We need to get something codified in law so that we have some confidence moving forward," Laitinen said.

In the meantime, CCRC is learning more about the emissions systems and how to repair them more quickly so sidelined trucks can get back on the road.

As of this writing, the PLOW Storms Act has had a hearing before the US House Committee on Energy & Commerce's Environment Subcommittee but has not advanced yet. Laitinen expects the effort will eventually need a broader push from road agencies as it moves through Congress.

While Laitinen acknowledged that his initial motivation was to find a solution for CCRC, he said the benefits could extend well beyond Chippewa County to road agencies across Michigan and other Northern States.

Seeing the PLOW Storms Act signed into law would be "a tremendous point of pride," Laitinen said. "That's a huge legacy item." **CRA**

FROM LETTER TO LEGISLATION



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Scan the QR code to read Rob Laitinen's letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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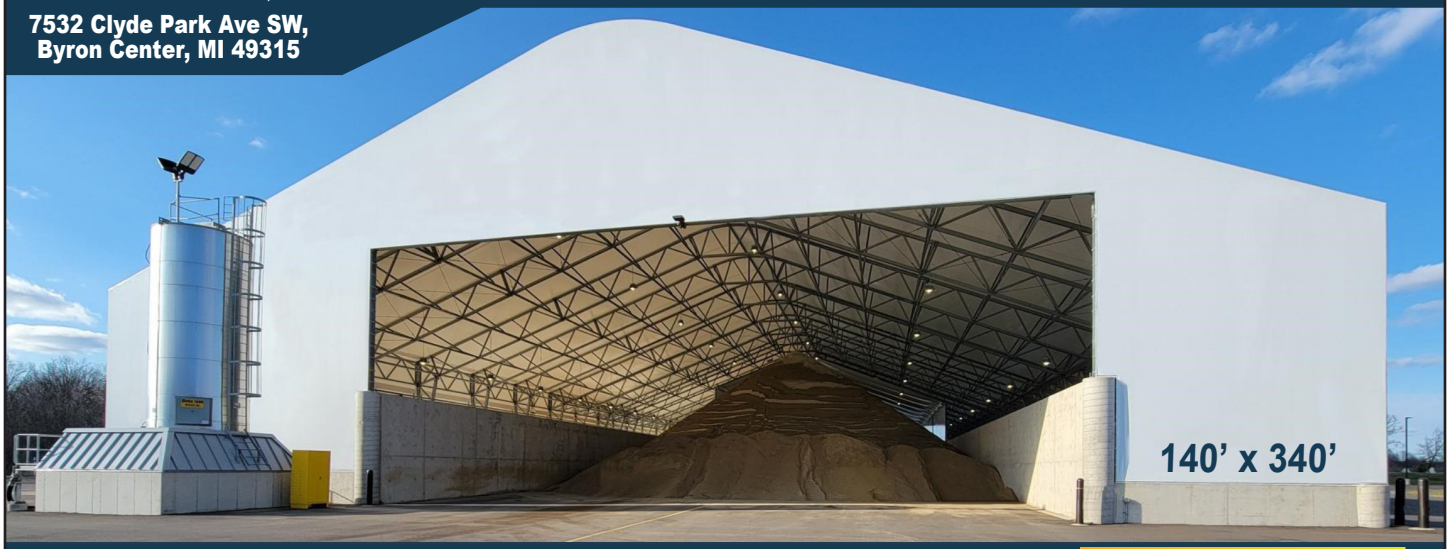
Scan the QR code to download CRA's resolution supporting the PLOW Storms Act for county road agencies to consider adopting.

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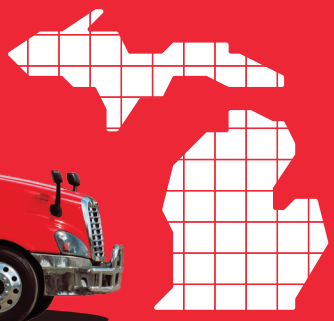
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FEATURE:

WHEN DEER MEET THE ROAD

Kent County Road Commission takes science-based approach to reducing deer-vehicle crashes

For the **Kent County Road Commission** (KCRC), deer-vehicle crashes aren't a peripheral traffic safety issue. According to Michigan Traffic Crash Facts, Kent County has consistently been one of Michigan's leading counties for deer-vehicle crashes; ranking first in 2022, 2023 and 2024.

Oakland County claimed the top spot in 2025. A distinction KCRC was happy to relinquish.

On roads maintained by KCRC, deer-vehicle crashes account for about 25% of all crashes — and on some rural primary road segments, that figure can reach 70%, according to KCRC managing director **Jerry Byrne.**

"Our job is to provide reasonably safe and convenient roads," Byrne said. "If we can reduce the number of those crashes, that's a good thing."

With nearly 2,000 miles of county roads to maintain, KCRC has made reducing deer-vehicle crashes a priority, helping to form the **Kent County Deer Management Coalition** in 2024 to develop a coordinated, science-based approach to deer management.

KENT COUNTY Deer Management Coalition

Rounding up partners

With communities across Kent County facing their own deer-related challenges, from residential property damage to agricultural losses, KCRC saw an opportunity.

"We started hearing from separate entities saying, 'Hey, we need to do something,'" Byrne said. "So we said, 'Let's stop a minute. Let's do it as a countywide effort, not just township-by-township or city-by-city.' Deer can't tell jurisdictional lines."

The Coalition includes KCRC, local townships, cities and villages, Kent County, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) and other partners.

Letting the data lead

KCRC and other Coalition partners wanted data to guide their next steps.

"We had to step back and say, 'You can't solve this like a winter storm, where it's over and done,'" Byrne said. "It's an ongoing problem that needs to be looked at scientifically."

With the Coalition in place, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) was hired to conduct a year-long study of deer management in Kent County, with the Coalition investing approximately $60,000 in the research.

Continued on page 21

Top 10 Counties for Deer-Vehicle Collisions (2025)

*(*According to Michigan Traffic Crash Facts)*

1. Oakland
2. Kent
3. Jackson
4. Genesee
5. Allegan
6. Ottawa
7. Clinton
8. Lapeer
9. Washtenaw
10. Calhoun

Michigan Traffic Crash Facts is an official safety resource produced by the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning and the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute. Funded by highway safety grants, the platform compiles and analyzes traffic crash data collected by the Michigan State Police across all 83 counties.

Scan QR code to explore the full data and regional statistics.

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GVSU analyzed deer populations, habitat and crash data and gathered extensive public input, including more than 6,000 survey responses.

For Byrne, one of the study's greatest values was helping KCRC and its partners identify specific areas and corridors where their efforts could have the greatest impact.

The study also revealed something that surprised him: Public support for deer management was strong. Fifty-one percent of respondents reported too many deer around their homes and 8% identified deer-vehicle collisions as a concern.

Adding expertise

GVSU released their complete findings and recommendations to the Deer Management Coalition in November 2025. With recommendations in hand, the Coalition needed someone who could turn the research into action.

"We needed a person in-house to handle the calls and put the energy into this that I couldn't do as the manager," Byrne said. "I couldn't dedicate a staff person to it either. It really is a full-time job."

The Coalition contracted with USDA Wildlife Services for a biologist based at KCRC.

"We treat him just like he's one of ours, except he wears a USDA shirt every day," Byrne said.

From study to action

With the research complete, the Deer Management Coalition is now putting its findings to work.

Deer Connections, a web-based platform being piloted in Kent County this fall, connects eligible landowners with hunters to increase hunting access on private land. The platform can also connect harvested deer with people and organizations seeking donated venison.

The MDNR, Deer Management Coalition and National Deer Association helped fund the platform, which Byrne said is one of only two in the nation.

The Deer Management Coalition is also working with the MDNR and ag community to increase the use of crop damage permits.

"Last year about 30 permits were issued in Kent County. This year we're pushing 500," Byrne said. "We're helping agriculture understand how to work with the DNR to get those permits."

A refrigerated trailer has also been placed at a local farm, where the USDA biologist is working with area farmers to harvest deer for their own use, to share with others or to donate.

"If we can get 1,000, 2,000, 10,000 pounds of venison donated, it's going to feed a lot of people," Byrne said.

KCRC is putting the research to work within its own right of way, too, including a third late-season mowing and increased mowing widths to improve visibility for motorists.

"We believe that added visibility is allowing for fewer crashes because people can see the deer and the deer can see the people," Byrne said.

Lessons learned

For county road agencies looking to reduce deer-vehicle crashes, Byrne said KCRC's experience can provide a starting point.

"Any road agency can look at the GVSU data and use a lot of the same things they recommended for Kent County."

Scan QR code to view to the GVSU study and recommendations. **CRA**



Way to go, Andy!

Meet KCRC's "Deer Sheriff"

For more than 20 years, Andy Albertson has worked for the Kent County Road Commission (KCRC), earning the unofficial nickname "Deer Sheriff" for responding to reports of deer within the county road right of way.

Earlier this year, Albertson reached an "un-herd of" milestone: Removing his 50,000th deer. By Aug. 20, that total climbed to 50,334.

"It's certainly an interesting way to make a living," Albertson said. "But it's an important public service. I'm proud to do it, and people are generally happy to see me!"

More information

Scan QR code to learn more about the Deer Management Coalition.



FEATURE:

ONE YEAR IN, ROAD CONDUCTOR® TOPS 250 ROAD JOBS MANAGED

Materials tracking, offline field access and a contractor workspace are here!

When Road Conductor® went live in July 2025, the assignment was clear: Replace Field Manager® for nonfederal aid road and bridge work before the old software ran out of pavement.

One construction season later, nearly 200 licensed users from county road agencies, municipalities, engineering consultants and road builder contractors are administering projects on the CRA-managed, Michigan Tech-developed, cloud-based platform.

What's new and on the way?

The most-requested Phase II module is here. Materials tracking and certification now runs at two levels: Agencies build and maintain a materials library, and individual jobs draw from that library or define materials of their own.

Daily Work Reports (DWRs) has gained a Materials tab for recording quantities by pay item, syncing materials from associated items and creating job materials. Two new reports – job material history and materials-by-item – round out the module.

For many agencies, materials tracking and certification is a must have feature, says **Cole Shafer,** PE, county highway engineer, **Oceana County Road Commission.**

"We have projects that will benefit greatly from the new materials and certification features," said Shafer. "This was one of the reasons we committed to Road Conductor® and we're excited to see it.

On the road, on or off the network

For staff on the go, Road Conductor® is now available through an optimized mobile web interface, putting the platform on phones and tablets without a download or an app store account.

Offline support for DWRs comes with the new mobile interface. Inspectors can create and edit DWRs where there is no internet signal, a familiar problem on rural and Upper Peninsula projects. The work syncs automatically once you get in range of a network.

A place for contractors

Rounding out Phase II, contractors can now be added to jobs with custom permissions, giving them a workspace to manage their side of the project while agencies keep control of what is shared.

The Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association (MITA) sat in on the work committees and helped shape the module. Contractors are already using it on live jobs.

Phase III on the horizon

Development and upgrades remain funded by user subscriptions and a significant legislative grant. They are prioritized by the Road Conductor® Advisory Group of counties, municipalities, consultants and contractors.

"With Phase II now implemented, the Road Conductor® picture is fully developed," said **Burt Thompson,** PE, CRA engineering specialist, who serves on the Advisory Group guiding development.

"Many, many engineers and project managers are excited for the future of Road Conductor® after seeing what a year of real-world use taught us, and the value of users driving the roadmap," Thompson said. It's a sentiment early adopters share.

"We've used it for two full construction seasons now and it's been a very positive experience," said **Rebekkah Ausbury,** PE, assistant county highway engineer, **Allegan County Road Commission.** "It's very intuitive, easy to use, updates are seamless and the team is very responsive to feedback."

All Phase II features are available now to current subscribers at no additional cost. Because it's a cloud-based system, updates are automatic to every user. Annual subscriptions start at $1,000, with quantity pricing, at roadconductor.com.

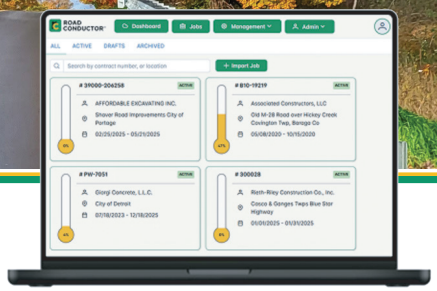
Contact Dustin Earley at 517.482.1189 or dearley@micountyroads.org. **CRA**

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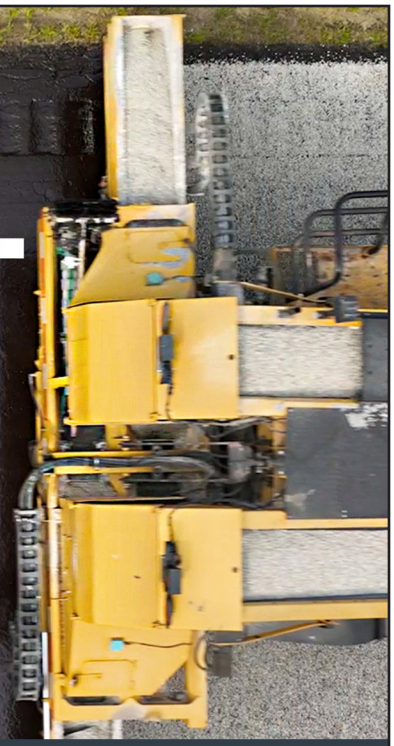
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LEGISLATOR PROFILE

PAT OUTMAN
Chair, House Transportation
State Representative | 91st District





State Rep. Pat Outman is serving his third term representing Michigan's 91st House District, which includes most of Montcalm County and portions of Kent and Ionia counties.

Before being elected to the Michigan House in 2020, Rep. Outman worked in the House Committee Clerk's Office and later served as district liaison for Montcalm County. He also chaired the Montcalm County Republican Party.

Crossroads and CRA Chief Deputy and Legislative Director Ed Noyola spoke with Rep. Outman about his background, legislative priorities, and the transportation issues facing Michigan.

CRA: Tell us about your background and what led you to become a state lawmaker.

Rep. Outman: My background is rooted in the skilled trades. My family has been in the excavating business for four generations, dating back to the 1950s, so I grew up around construction projects, roads and utilities. It's rewarding to drive through my district and point to projects our family helped build.

During the winter months, when excavation work slowed, I also worked in residential construction. Those experiences gave me a practical understanding of the challenges facing contractors, communities and infrastructure.

I also credit my father, former State Representative and current Sen. Rick Outman, for inspiring my interest in public service. Watching him serve in both the House and Senate gave me a firsthand look at how state government works and how elected officials can make a difference. Between growing up in a small business and seeing my father's experience in Lansing, I wanted to bring real-world experience to the Legislature.

CRA: As chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, what are your top priorities?

Rep. Outman: Building on the progress we've made with road funding remains my biggest priority. The Legislature made a historic investment, but we know there is still more work to do.

I'm also focused on improving how transportation projects are delivered. Better coordination among utilities, contractors and local road agencies can help projects move more efficiently while providing better value for taxpayers.

CRA: How do you approach the many complex bills that come before your committee?

Rep. Outman: We keep the process straightforward. We ask whether a proposal improves safety, makes government work better, uses taxpayer dollars wisely and benefits local communities.

We also spend a great deal of time listening. We meet with county road agencies, MDOT, contractors, local governments and industry experts to understand how proposals will work in the real world before they come up for a vote.

Transportation is one of the areas where lawmakers can often work across party lines. I try to focus on practical solutions rather than partisan ones, and that's one of the things I've enjoyed most about serving on the committee.

CRA: Following passage of the 2025 Road Funding Package, what transportation priorities remain?

Rep. Outman: I like to use a baseball analogy. The road funding package got us to second base, but it wasn't the home run we ultimately wanted.

Continued on page 27

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As someone who grew up around construction, I know delaying maintenance only makes projects more expensive later. We made the largest long-term investment in roads in Michigan history, but roads and bridges will continue to require significant investment.

In the long term, we also need to evaluate how transportation is funded as vehicles become more fuel efficient and electric vehicles become more common.

Beyond funding, I believe one of our biggest opportunities is improving project coordination through better underground utility mapping, stronger "dig once" policies and better communication among agencies. Those improvements can save taxpayers millions of dollars while reducing unnecessary construction delays.

CRA: What makes CRA and county road agencies effective partners as the Legislature considers transportation policy?

Rep. Outman: CRA members work with these issues every day. They maintain thousands of miles of roads and bring a practical perspective that legislators can't get from every transportation organization.

I also appreciate that CRA doesn't simply identify problems. The Association consistently brings thoughtful, real-world solutions to the table, and that makes it easier to develop sound public policy.

CRA: Looking back on your time in the Legislature, what accomplishment are you most proud of?

Rep. Outman: Helping pass the largest long-term road funding investment in Michigan history is certainly near the top of the list. I'm also proud of helping deliver meaningful tax relief and supporting bipartisan legislation that improves state government.

CRA: Looking ahead, what transportation policy issues will require continued attention?

Rep. Outman: Utility coordination remains one of my biggest priorities. We also need to continue thinking about long-term transportation funding. Those issues will remain important throughout my time in the Legislature.

CRA: Is there anything else you'd like CRA members to know?

Rep. Outman: I want to thank CRA members for the work they do. Most people don't think about roads until something goes wrong, but your work affects nearly every aspect of Michigan's economy and quality of life.

My door is always open. Some of the best ideas I've worked on have come from the people doing this work every day, and I look forward to continuing that partnership because there's still a great deal we can accomplish together.

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LEGAL ISSUES CORNER

IT'S ABOUT TIME...

Procurement thresholds get a long-needed update

By Jennifer Henderson, General Counsel, Road Commission for Oakland County
Paige Strawska, RCOC Legal Department Intern

On July 21, 2026, Gov. Whitmer signed HB 4415, a long-awaited **CRA Legislative Priority.** HB 4415, now known as Public Act 91 of 2026, finally updated the threshold amounts for required sealed bidding and an emergency purchase without a bid. The last major updates to these thresholds took place in 2005. Looking forward, further amendments to the threshold amounts may not be necessary given the inflation/escalation clause included in this amendment.

A long-overdue update

HB 4415 is only the fourth update to MCL 224.10 that road agencies have seen since the 1980s. The last time MCL 224.10 was amended was Public Act 286 of 2020, effective March 25, 2021. That amendment extended the maximum length of time a road agency could pay on an installment contract for real or personal property (from 15 years to 30 years). This was also a **CRA Legislative Priority.**

Prior to that, the most recent threshold update occurred in 2005 when changes were instituted as part of broader procurement reform. Public Act 516 of 2004 aligned thresholds with actual costs of road-related purchases; improved procurement speed for essential services; and ensured that emergency and maintenance purchases were not delayed by overly low thresholds, at least in 2004 dollars. At that time, the bid threshold was increased from $10,000 to $15,000, and the emergency threshold was increased from $20,000 to $50,000.

HB 4415 is a significant move in both the dollar amounts and forward-looking progress, given the added provision automatically adjusting the threshold amounts using the Detroit Consumer Price Index (MCL 224.10(4)) after September 30, 2026.

The benefits of sealed bids

MCL 224.10(3) requires road agencies to engage in the sealed proposal/bidding process "for the purchase of machines, tools, appliances and materials" exceeding $75,000.

Sealed bids have been touted as promoting transparency and fairness, encouraging competitive pricing, improving accountability and oversight, and supporting efficient infrastructure spending. Improved bidding practices will also allow road agencies to appropriately allocate funds to competitive bidding projects while ensuring the best value and quality of these projects.

With the increased threshold, HB 4415 provides more opportunities for road agencies to purchase goods without the expense of bidding, streamlining smaller purchases while still providing structure and transparency for larger purchases. While the bidding process has its benefits, it can be onerous and expensive for a smaller agency.

Conclusion

The amendments to the thresholds in MCL 224.10(3) were long overdue. Many thanks to Rep. Tom Kuhn (R-Oakland) and CRA's legislative staff for their hard work on getting this bill across the finish line.

Even though road agencies will have to keep up annually with the moving dollar amounts under the inflation adjustment clause, the benefits of the higher thresholds (general goods and materials, as well as the emergency threshold) outweigh the bad here.

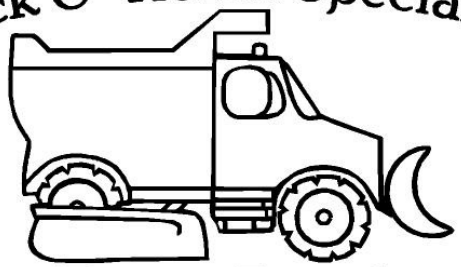
HB 4415 is not the only bill on the radar. This legislative session has a handful of bills that affect road agencies and their activities. While CRA will certainly keep you posted through its communications, you can also use CRA's online Bill Tracker.

Some bills to watch include HBs 6044-6046 (right-of-way and abandonments), HB 5506 (lobbying activities), HB 5900 (condemnation), and most recently the re-introduction of a bill changing the employee healthcare hard cap (SB 1136).

Stay tuned… **CRA**

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AWARDS SPOTLIGHT

KALKASKA COUNTY ROAD COMMISSION MANAGER JOHN ROGERS HONORED BY GLTPA

John Rogers, manager of the **Kalkaska County Road Commission,** received the Michigan Merit Award from the Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association (GLTPA) during its Spring Celebration in Harris.

Rogers was honored for "his continuing effort to learn, communicate and partner with GLTPA to improve Michigan's forest industry by providing reasonable transportation solutions for trucking forest products on Kalkaska County's road system."

Congratulations, John!



John Rogers (center) receives the Michigan Merit Award from GLTPA Executive Director Henry Schienebeck (left) and Denny Olson (right).

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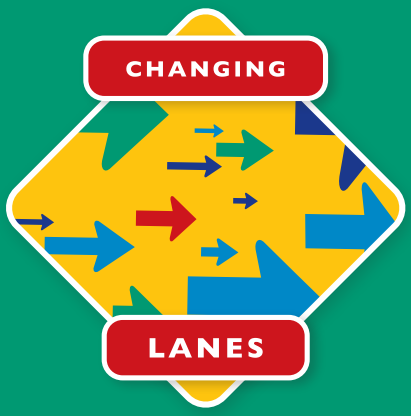
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Key transitions at...

Road Commissions and Departments ➜

Derek Renbarger is the new superintendent for the **Berrien County Road Department.**

Kaden Hallock, Jason Kindel and **Caden Passmore** are new truck drivers for the **Clinton County Road Commission.**

James Patton, PE, is the new managing director of the **Ingham County Road Department.**

Heather Meichert is the new director of operations at the **Ionia County Road Commission.**

Scott Wanagat, PE, is interim director of the **Macomb County Department of Roads.**

Tonia Crawford is the new human resource administrator for the **St. Clair County Road Commission.**

Sean Reinig is the new director of maintenance at the **Saginaw County Road Commission.**

Mile Markers ➜

Greg Trail has retired as superintendent for the **Berrien County Road Department.**

Kyle Graham has retired from the sign shop at the **Clinton County Road Commission.**

Paul Bouman, PE, has retired as director of engineering for the **Muskegon County Road Commission.**

Todd Boucher has retired as stock clerk at the **Muskegon County Road Commission.**

Daniel Medina has retired as director of maintenance for the **Saginaw County Road Commission.**

CRA





COMMUNICATION CORNER

TAKE IT TO THE COMMENTS

Managing the ups and downs of social media engagement

Should county road agencies allow comments on social media? Comments create opportunities to answer questions, build trust and engage with residents. And they can become time-consuming and contentious.

Thanks for keeping us updated!

Crossroads reached out to **Kylie Dontje,** communications coordinator for the **Genesee County Road Commission** (GCRC), and **Adri Boone**, communications coordinator for the **Berrien County Road Department** (BCRD), for their experiences managing social media comments. *(Hint: There is no right or wrong approach.)*

Finding what works for your agency

For GCRC, leaving comments on has never been a debate. With 19,000 Facebook followers, Dontje says the platform has become one of the agency's most important ways to communicate with residents.

"We've just always had our comments on," Dontje said. "There's never really been a serious conversation about turning them off, and I would advocate for leaving them on."

BCRD has taken a different path. Boone oversees a Facebook page with 17,000 followers, and the approach has evolved as county government revised its social media policy. Today, residents can comment on posts, but the county's social media policy prohibits staff from responding publicly except to direct people to contact the road department by phone or email.

Having worked under several different comment policies, Boone said she's learned one important lesson. "Pick one direction or another. Either allow comments and respond to them or disable comments if you don't have the resources. The middle ground is difficult."

Weighing the pros and cons

For Dontje, comments are door openers beyond individual conversations.

"The biggest benefit is the feedback we get," she said. "People ask really good questions, and sometimes they point out something I should have included in the original post. If one person is asking, there are probably other people wondering the same thing."

Dontje also views comments as an opportunity to demonstrate openness.

"As a government agency, you want to give people a space where they can ask questions and voice their concerns," she said. "Turning comments off might be perceived as a lack of transparency."

The tradeoff, Dontje acknowledged, is that negative comments can affect employee morale.

"Our staff sometimes read those comments about their work, and it can have an impact."

Boone also sees benefits to open dialogue. When BCRD staff were able to respond publicly, she said answering common questions in the comments often helped other residents looking for the same information.

"Sometimes that eliminates the need for someone to ask the same question," Boone said. "Not everyone has the time to pick up the phone during office hours to call us."

When are you fixing my road?

But Boone encourages agencies to honestly evaluate whether they have the staffing and resources to support engagement.

"If you have the staff to actively monitor comments and respond, that's probably the ideal situation," she said. "If you don't have those resources, disabling comments may make more sense than allowing comments you can't address."

Managing difficult comments

For Dontje, the priority is making sure everyone reading the comments receives accurate information.

"If there's misinformation, I always correct it. I'm not trying to start an argument. I'm correcting it because other people are reading the comments, and I don't want them to believe something that isn't true."

At the same time, she said communicators have to know when to step away.

"You have to make a judgment call about whether someone is asking a legitimate question or just trying to air their grievances."

Building trust

Dontje believes allowing comments has helped build an engaged online community.

"I've had people tell me, 'This page is so informative,'" she said. "They're grateful they have a place to ask questions."

She said engaged followers often become advocates for GCRC. "They'll answer questions, correct misinformation and even stand up for our employees."

Boone said residents have adapted to BCRD's current approach.

"Our audience is very smart," she said. "People who really want an answer have figured out they can reach out through Messenger or call the office. Others simply want a place to share their thoughts."



> **"Negativity isn't just going to go away. People will just find another page to make their comments."**
>
> *– Kylie Dontje, Genesee*

Lessons learned

Dontje encourages agencies to think beyond the negative comments.

"Negativity isn't just going to go away," she said. "People will just find another page to make their comments. If it's on your page, you can help control the information people are receiving and your reaction to it."

Boone's advice is equally practical.

"Look at your capabilities," she said. "If you have the staffing and time to support responding, then be fully open and transparent. If you don't have the staffing, choose the option you can consistently support."

She also encourages agencies to formalize their approach.

"I do think it's important to have a social media policy," Boone said. "Having something to refer to makes it easier to explain why you're handling things the way you are."

Beyond social media

Boone said social media is an important communications tool, but it shouldn't be the only way residents receive information.

"Social media's tough because not everyone's on social media," she said. "However you engage with your public, meet them where they are."

Why was this project selected?

At BCRD, residents can subscribe to *BCRD Alert*, powered by Regroup, to receive updates by email, text message or through a mobile app. Subscribers choose how they want to receive notifications, providing another way for BCRD to deliver information directly to residents.

"You can't always tell how your audience is going to see your social media posts," Boone said. "But if someone subscribes to alerts, they're going to consistently receive that information in the way their preferences are set up."

"Social media is a piece, but it's not everything." **CRA**



> **"Social media is a piece, but it's not everything."**
>
> *– Adri Boone, Berrien*

Want to hear more?

Hear more from Kylie Dontje and Adri Boone during "Take It to the Comments" at CRA's 2026 Communications Workshop.

Tuesday, Nov. 3 | 11:45 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Comfort Inn & Suites and Conference Center | Mt. Pleasant

To register now or for more information, scan the QR code.

PUBLISHER'S COLUMN

Ready, set … go fix those roads and bridges!

BY: DENISE DONOHUE



Fall. It's not normally a time for new beginnings. But here we are!

A year ago in this column, I urged us to "leave it all on the mat" in our collective efforts to push a $3 B road funding package across the legislative finish line. And we were all part of that solution – even though it ended up being $2 B, itself an historic amount.

Last September 3rd, several county road agencies participated in the large road funding rallies organized by MITA (Michigan Infrastructure & Transportation Association) in both Lansing and Negaunee.

And last fall, CRA released our *2024 County Road Progress Report*. Data from over 90% of counties showed a stall in the miles of roads improved. The dollars weren't going as far as they used to, and vehicle efficiency lowered gas tax receipts.

This fall, it's a new beginning: The first Neighborhood Road Funds (NRF) – 52% of which are dedicated to counties and $100 M to bridges – have shown up in your Michigan Transportation Fund distribution!

It has been a long wait, with four months of counties' road funds decreased a painful 18% until the gas-tax-for-sales-tax swap distribution kicked in during April. Now, the long-awaited NRF completes the transition.

This diversification of road funding sources has been new to all parties involved, with lots of uncertainty about when dollars will actually arrive.

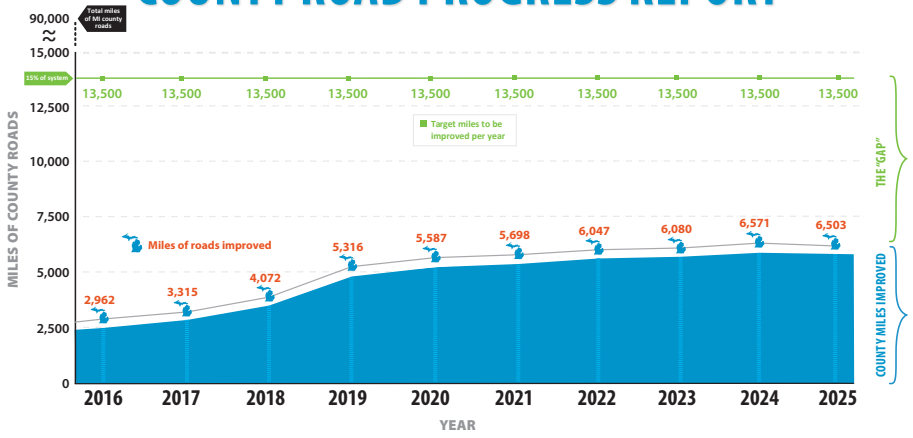
So, while the 2026 construction season is pretty well in the bag, every county I've talked to has surged ahead to line up priorities for the new road funding and is crafting "no-match" NRF policies and having discussions with their townships.

CRA is also pleased to note that of the 156 new and renewal road funding millages on the August 2026 Primary Election ballot, 96% of renewals and 92% of new millages passed. Congratulations are due to all those counties and townships with the vision to see that continued support of local millages along with NRF and more original-style MTF can leverage the new dollars and make big progress in 2027 and beyond!

As we move toward fall, CRA has just released the *2025 County Road Progress Report* that covers last construction season. For the first time in 11 years, the data show a reduction in the miles of roads improved in 2025 vs. 2024. It's not a statistically significant mileage decrease, but the first time the survey showed fewer miles improved.

In short, we're thankful the 2025 Road Funding Package is showing up – and can't wait to see the funds in full-force for 2027.

COUNTY ROAD PROGRESS REPORT



Denise Donohue

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