

# CROSSROADS

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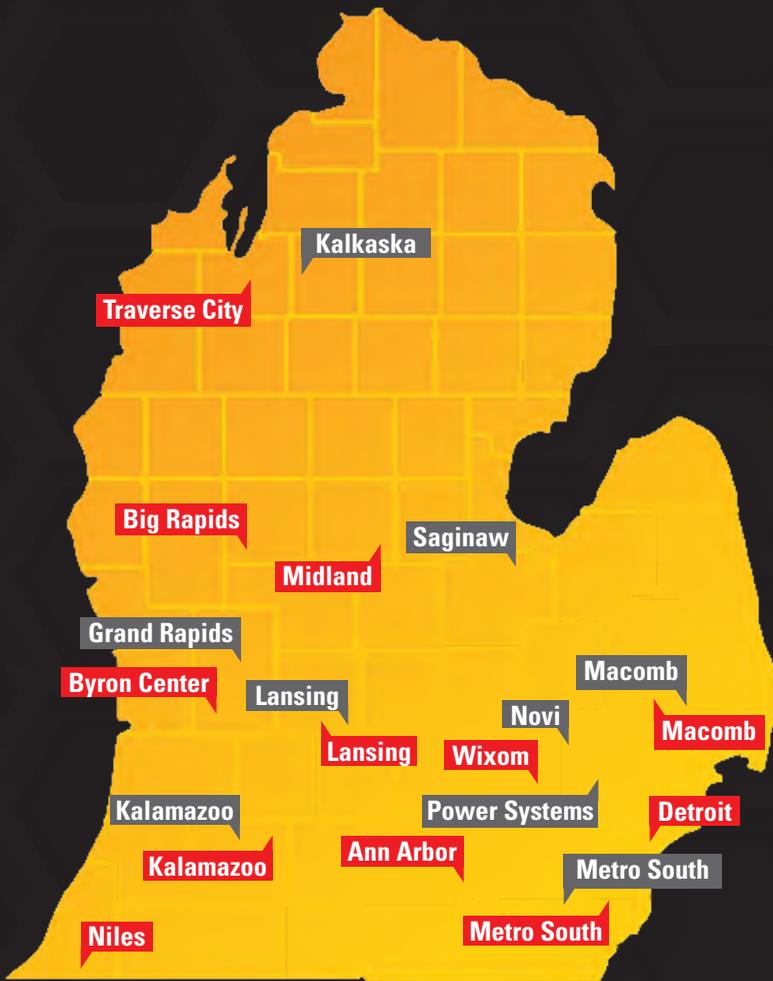


## A ROAD FUNDING VICTORY DECADES IN THE MAKING!

How Michigan's 2025 Transportation Package  
finally crossed the finish line



MEMBER FEATURE pg. 7



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# CROSSROADS

Crossroads is a publication of the County Road Association (CRA) of Michigan. The 83 county members of CRA support a safe and efficient county road system in Michigan. The Association is dedicated to helping members promote and maintain a safe, efficient county road right-of-way in rural and urban Michigan.

## ON THE COVER

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer joins CRA staff and Board president in celebrating Michigan's new transportation funding package. Standing left to right: CRA CEO Denise Donohue; Jerry Byrne, CRA president and Kent County Road Commission managing director; Ed Noyola, CRA chief deputy and legislative director; and Tom Steinbis, CRA legislative specialist.

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# PRESIDENT'S CORNER



Michigan's county road agencies have long operated with a practical mindset. We are well versed in stretching limited resources, balancing short-term fixes with long-term needs, and finding ways to deliver safe, reliable infrastructure within budgetary constraints.

The recently enacted transportation funding package represents meaningful progress for our state. While the outcome differs from what was originally discussed or what is needed to meet the full extent of our statewide needs, county road agencies fared well overall.

The legislation recognizes that, collectively, counties maintain the largest share of Michigan's transportation network. Our ability to secure equal percentage increases for all 83 agencies underscores the strength and unity of the County Road Association when we speak with one voice.

That's why Michigan's new long-term transportation funding package represents such an important step forward. Through bipartisan effort, the Legislature secured the largest transportation investment in state history!

For county road agencies, this package signals more than additional dollars: It is a form of validation. In a landscape where needs have long outpaced revenue, the fact that lawmakers prioritized transportation at this level reflects an understanding that roads and bridges are not just infrastructure; they're the foundation of a community's mobility and economic vitality.

Still, much remains to be determined. The funding framework is in place, but the specifics, including how and when the dollars will be distributed, are still being defined at the

state level. During this transition, it's expected that road agencies may initially experience a short-term dip before the new revenue streams are fully activated. That uncertainty can be stressful, particularly for agencies already operating on tight budgets.

CRA continues to work closely with legislators statewide and MDOT to clarify these details and underscore the importance that the new funding structure reflects the realities of local road responsibilities. This advocacy remains critical as we move toward implementation.

Amid these unknowns, we remain focused on solutions, working together to navigate change and sustain progress. Network improvements do not happen in isolation. Collaboration with townships remains one of our most effective tools for improving local road conditions. Cost-share programs build a partnership that produces visible, measurable results year after year. This collaboration has not only improved pavement ratings but also has strengthened public trust in the collective work we accomplish.

No single funding plan will fix everything. Even with this historic package, Michigan's county road agencies must continue to balance preservation, safety and capacity needs within finite resources.

Progress in our field is typically measured in steady mile-by-mile gains, not sudden leaps. Each investment moves us closer to the reliable network Michigan residents deserve.

**Jerry Byrne**

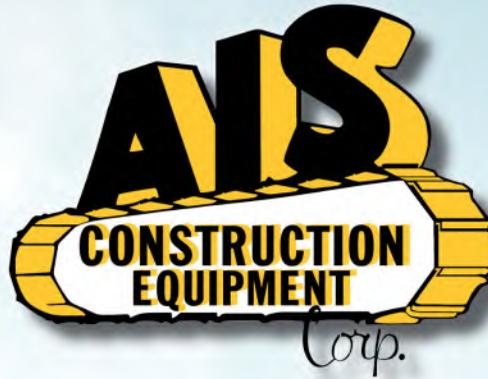
CRA President

Manager,

Kent County Road Commission



Gov. Whitmer celebrates new road funding with Kent County Road Commission (KCRC) representatives. Standing right to left: Jerry Byrne, CRA president and KCRC managing director; Maura Lamoreaux, communications manager; and Macy Barcheski, finance director.



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## MEMBER FEATURE

# MASON COUNTY

Look at us now!

Mason County did not begin with an identity of its own. It was established by the Michigan Legislature in 1840 as Notipekago County, meaning “heads on sticks,” a name rooted in a 17th-century conflict between the Ottawa, Mascouten and/or Potawatomi tribes along the Pere Marquette River near present-day Custer. The war, noted in oral tribal tradition, was fought over settlement rights in the area.

A more palatable name was adopted in 1843, when the county was renamed Mason after Michigan Gov. Stevens T. Mason (1835–1840). At the time, it was administered by modern-day Ottawa County, now three counties to the south, before organizing its own county government in 1855.

Mason County played an important role in Michigan’s logging history and is now known for fruit and vegetable production, outdoor recreation and tourism, including its miles of sandy freshwater shoreline and historic lighthouses.

Currently operating out of one of the oldest buildings among Michigan county road agencies, the **Mason County Road Commission** (MCRC) is reinventing itself on many fronts — and invites the public to “look at us now.”

### Restoring local roads

For the past six years, approximately half of MCRC’s Michigan Transportation Fund (MTF) dollars — totaling more than \$8 million — have been reallocated from primary to local roads, according to **Steve Wessels**, who has served as MCRC managing director since 2023.

“We’re trying to reach every part of our county — we want people to see us working on their roads,” he said. “We’re also looking at expanding our wedge and chip seal programs, and with new transportation funds coming in, we’ll be able to make more long-term fixes on our primary roads in the coming years.”

Another key goal for the MCRC Board is avoiding failed culverts, which contribute to poor drainage and impassable roads across the shoreline county. “As an organization, we set internal goals of replacing 34 failed culverts annually,” Wessels said. “We have already exceeded that goal for 2025.”

“From my point of view, we have a pretty good balance between local and primary roads in our project line-up.”

In addition, MCRC is working on the replacement of two “water crossings”

spanning this year and next. “This year, we replaced a multi-piece steel culvert that spans 65 feet and measures 12 feet in diameter,” Wessels noted. “In the spring of 2026, we will install a timber bridge as phase two. This project will be partially funded by Trout Unlimited.”

*Continued on page 9*



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MCRC's 85-year-old building.

“That financial progress has allowed us to rethink what to do about our 85-year-old building,” he added. While quaint, the MCRC office must be accessed through separate left or right front doors depending on which staff you need to visit — the two sides do not connect.

“Believe it or not, we have no separate men’s and women’s restrooms, no locker rooms for women, and our ‘board room’ is too small for meetings and not ADA-compliant — we have to use a township hall down the road,” Wessels said.

There is also no handicap access to the upstairs engineering offices, and the two office areas are divided by an aging garage that is too small for modern trucks.

In 2025, MCRC constructed a new salt shed on 90 acres in Custer, approximately three miles east of the current office. The site will eventually also accommodate a new office building.

“Our goal — mine and the Board’s — is to be the best employer in the county, and the condition, fairness and accessibility of our office space are part of that,” Wessels said. “The well-being and overall happiness of our employees is my number-one concern. The work we do is only as good as our employees.”

*Continued on page 11*

### Taking a good look with local officials

In October 2025, MCRC staff organized their annual bus tour, which featured 14 locations showcasing projects completed over the past year.

“We had 30 people on the bus, including township trustees, county board members and the county administrator, a state representative, engineers, our finance staff, the superintendent of roads, our road commissioners and members of the media,” Wessels said.

“The tour began with a dinner prepared and provided by MCRC staff. While we ate, our team shared details about each project from both an engineering and financial perspective and answered any questions.”

“This tour allowed us not only to highlight the work we’ve completed, but also to help everyone better understand the value townships receive for their investment,” Wessels added. “It was an excellent experience that helped participants see both our accomplishments and the challenges still ahead.”

### Paying down debt and planning new facilities

For the past two MCRC managing directors, getting the fiscal house in order has been a top priority. “We’ve been making extra contributions to our MERS pension plan, which is now more than 80% funded, and our other post-employment benefits (OPEB) have been eliminated through union negotiations,” Wessels said.



MCRC's new salt barn.



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MCRC staff.

### Building the team and modernizing operations

When Wessels joined MCRC after 18 years at the Michigan Department of Transportation, one of his first steps was revising the organizational chart and creating new leadership roles.

“We need to trust our staff and let them do their jobs, and to have good ideas,” Wessels said. “I tell them everyone’s job is to strive to do the job of the next guy ‘up the line.’ That plays into succession planning.”

“Just like a coach, it’s my job to put the right people in the right places. If changes need to be made, it’s my job to pull someone in or out – to make a trade,” he said. “Some positions – such as mechanics – where we don’t have a deep bench, we have to work harder to retain those people.”

A handful of county road agencies employ a surveyor, and MCRC is one of them.

“We use him for all our projects; he marks the center of the road and all our ‘paper roads,’” Wessels said. “He knows how to read easements, deeds and we have a lot of abandonments in this area. I believe it helps us by limiting legal issues related to our maintenance activities, when we know more precisely where the center of the road is located.”

### Using technology to manage assets

One of MCRC’s new initiatives is using geographic information systems (GIS) to map all road assets. They’re working with Spicer Engineering to inventory and map these assets to drive the handling of service requests.

Wessels demonstrated the system using a large-screen map displaying color-coded symbols for bridges, culverts and signs.

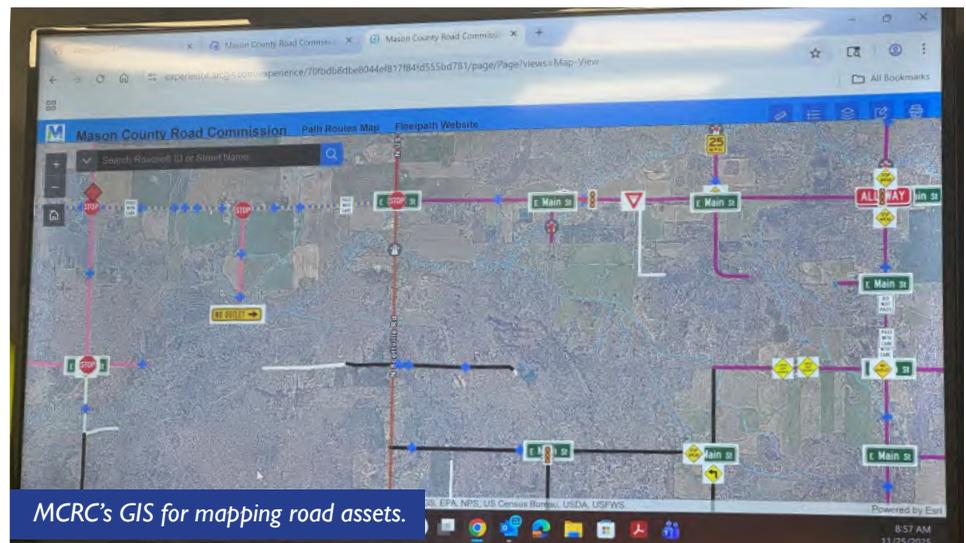
“When we receive a service request, or when our staff identifies a problem in the field, we code it into the GIS map,” Wessels said. “When the foreman comes on duty, he can see through the color coding which requests have been cleared and which still need to be addressed,

allowing him to assign work accordingly.”

On the public-facing side, MCRC was also one of the first road agencies to adopt Snow Paths. “The system allows residents to see exactly where our trucks have plowed in their area and relative to their homes. We’ll also be using it to track dust control and mowing work, in addition to winter plowing,” Wessels said.

MCRC is also partnering with MDOT on a pilot Lidar (light detection and ranging) project to track salt volume in the shared MDOT-MCRC storage shed. Eight laser sensors measure the fullness of the salt shed, providing improved accountability and precision in salt use, Wessels said.

*Continued on page 13*



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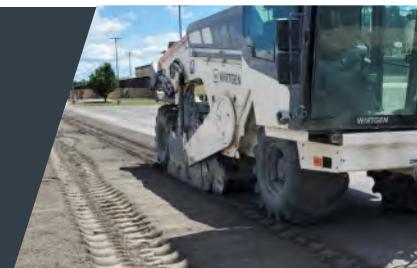
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MCRC staff at the Ludington Freedom Festival in July 2025.

Another new technology at MCRC is the Rapid Radio system. These walkie-talkie-style units are next-generation communication devices designed for obstructed environments, operating on cellular push-to-talk technology. They can be pre-programmed with “talk groups,” allowing communication to be shared across counties when needed.

MCRC purchased Rapid Radios in October 2023, making them a relatively new addition to its crisis response plan. Their value became clear during the Northern Michigan ice storm in March 2024, when phone lines and cell towers were crippled in other counties.

“They were extremely helpful because we weren’t relying solely on our 800 MHz radios, which are analog,” Wessels said. “When we arrived in Cheboygan County, we quickly discovered our truck-mounted radios no longer worked due to the lack of towers in that area.”

During the disaster response, MCRC deployed a 15-person crew to help clear more than 100 miles of MDOT trunkline in Cheboygan County over a two-week period, reflecting the strong mutual-assis-

tance ethic shared among county road agencies.

### Mason community spirit!

“One of the things I take great pride in is building strong relationships with our County Board of Commissioners, our sheriff’s department and the people we work with every day,” Wessels said. “Community outreach is huge for us.”

As part of those efforts, MCRC partners with four Mason County schools through its Paint-a-Plow program. Each school decorates a plow that is then featured at community events in which the MCRC crew participates. These include the Festival of Lights parade, Fourth of July Parade, Western Michigan Fair and the Scottville Fall Festival.

MCRC also dedicates staff time each year to the county fair, engaging directly with residents and strengthening public relations within the community. In July, MCRC staff participated in the Ludington Freedom Festival parade under the theme “Superheroes Work Here!” Staff had fun and the community loved it, Wessels said. [CRA](#)

# JUST THE FACTS

Office Headquarters: **SCOTTVILLE**

**43** full-time staff



**3** Commissioners (appointed)

## MILES OF ROAD: 942

Total paved: **371 miles**

Primary: **221** Local: **150**

Total unpaved: **571 miles**

Primary: **18** Local: **553**

MDOT Contract: **39** Bridges  
**Yes**  
(164 lane miles)



Annual Budget: **\$16.8 M** Local Revenue: **\$2.3 M**  
(FY 2025) (FY 2025)

Annual Snowfall  
**77”**

MCRC Established  
**1894**



Office Built  
**1940**

**FUN FACT:** In Ludington’s 2025 Freedom Festival parade, the Mason County Road Commission crew “went as” Superheroes. “Superheroes Work Here!” Part fun, part recruiting statement.



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## FEATURE:

# BONDING FOR BETTER ROADS

Oceana County Road Commission delivers a decade of progress in one season

*128<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Oceana County after a crush, shape and pave.*

When the **Oceana County Road Commission** (OCRC) first explored the idea of bonding for road improvements, it wasn't an easy sell. Many local leaders were accustomed to the traditional pay-as-you-go approach. But OCRC managing director **Mark Timmer** had a different vision – a countywide road bond that would bring a decade's worth of improvements to the county's road network in a single construction season.

That idea first surfaced in 2021, when Timmer suggested borrowing funds to tackle Oceana's worst primary roads. The concept was tabled at the time, and resurfaced in 2023 when the timing and support lined up.

In 2024, OCRC issued a \$3.5 million bond to finance the paving of 25 miles of primary roads in all 16 townships – a coordinated program that transformed the county's road network in one construction season.

"No road agency can succeed at playing catch-up by improving only a mile or two each year," Timmer said. "Bonding gave us a way to get ahead."

### Why bonding made sense

For OCRC, bonding was not about borrowing to spend more. It was about *spending smarter*. By front-loading the work and structuring repayment through

existing township millages, OCRC could take advantage of competitive pricing, consistent material costs and the efficiency gained by bundling countywide work.

"When you put out one large package for contractors, you get better pricing and more consistent quality," Timmer explained. "Crews can stay mobilized, materials are bought in bulk, and everyone's working toward one big push instead of several small jobs."

Locking in 2024 construction prices protected local budgets from inflation

and maximized the value of every dollar invested. The scale of the work drew strong bidder interest. And those same paving and excavating contractors extended their bond bid prices to township projects that year, giving local partners access to better pricing and allowing them to complete connecting road segments.

"It was really a great thing for our county," Timmer said. "We saved \$5-\$8 per ton of asphalt depending on the mix."

*Continued on page 17*



*York Road at 128<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Ferry Township.*

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## Building the framework

To make the project possible, OCRC assembled a capable team of bond counsel and financial advisors to navigate state bonding requirements. Working under Michigan PA 34 of 2001, OCRC could issue a bond without a public vote, provided all notice and review requirements were met.

With the legal framework established, OCRC identified 25 miles of primary roads and designed the program so that each of the county's 16 townships would see at least one improvement.

"That was important to us," Timmer said. "We wanted the program to be countywide so everyone could see the results close to home." He added that township supervisors showed strong support, even attending the OCRC Board meeting where the plan was approved and thanking commissioners.

Before work began, OCRC completed the Michigan Department of Treasury's (MDT) formal bonding step: Filing a qualifying statement, securing approval and adopting resolutions of intent and issuance. Timmer described the process as structured but straightforward.

"If your financial records and millage revenues are in order, Treasury's review goes smoothly."

## From plan to pavement

Before moving forward, OCRC held public hearings to explain project costs, the bond structure and expected benefits. Once the County Commission passed a resolution of support, OCRC submitted its qualifying statement to MDT and received prompt approval.

"We made transparency a priority," Timmer said. "We explained how the bond would be repaid and worked closely with the County Board and Treasury. When people understand the process, they support the outcome."

From there, OCRC solicited proposals from multiple lenders to secure favorable terms and coordinated construction scheduling across all 16 townships.

Projects were grouped geographically and sequenced to minimize mobilization costs, reduce hauling distance and maintain consistency in materials and workmanship.

"We treated it as one large, countywide project," Timmer noted. "That allowed us to maintain consistent quality and build efficiencies you just can't get when projects are scattered over multiple years."

## Resetting the system

The bond focused on Oceana's worst primary roads. Completing them in a single season raised the county's overall PASER ratings and shifted maintenance from reconstruction to preservation.

OCRC produced maps showing the newly paved bonded "poor" roads in green and existing "good" routes in blue, a visual that demonstrated how the network had been reconnected and strengthened.

"Getting many roads paved in a single season resets the system," Timmer said. "After that, your regular millage dollars can go toward maintaining instead of rebuilding."

Residents noticed the results right away, Timmer said. Many commented, "I can't believe how much was done this year!" The progress, he added, built pride in the community and confidence that local road dollars were making a real difference.



## Timing and alignment

OCRC structured the bond for a 10-year repayment period, a deliberate decision that aligns with the typical lifespan of asphalt pavement.

"Bonding allows you to pay for tomorrow's roads at today's prices," Timmer said. "You get ahead and stay ahead."

OCRC's 2024 bond program contributed to a **record-setting \$16 M season** of road and bridge improvements.

Timmer's advice to other road agencies seeking support for a road bond: Don't give up if the timing isn't right. "If an idea is sound and benefits the community, regroup and present it again when the timing's right. Sometimes it just takes persistence," he said. **CRA**

## Oceana County Bonding by the Numbers:

Year **2024**

Townships benefited **16**

Miles of primary roads improved **25**

Bond value **\$3.5 M**

Bond term **10 years**

Total 2024 road and bridge work **\$16 M**

## Goal:

Deliver a decade of improvements in one season and reset the system for long-term maintenance.

## Want more?

Scan the QR code to view Timmer's Power-Point presentation.





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## A NEW LAYER OF THINKING

St. Joseph County Road Commission uses rubberized chip seal as an interlayer to restore a long-troubled road

Until last year, Old M-103 was a problem without a (cost-effective) solution for the **St. Joseph County Road Commission** (SJCRC). Once a state highway, the half-mile stretch of concrete in the county's southwest corner was old, cracked and costly to reconstruct with no practical maintenance plan.

A turning point came in 2021, when SJCRC first tried ground tire rubber chip seal (aka engineered crumb rubber or ECR) through an EGLE grant.

SJCRC assistant managing director **Garrett Myland**, PE, admitted he "wasn't completely sold on it" at first. "We'd never seen it go down before," he said. But seeing it applied on Eagley Road in St. Joseph County changed his mind.

Over the next several seasons, SJCRC steadily expanded its use of ECR: One mile in 2021, 10 miles in 2022, 12 miles in 2023 and more than 24 miles in 2024.

After seeing how flexible and consistent ECR sealcoat was in the field, SJCRC began to wonder whether it could do more than serve as a surface treatment. Which led to using it as an interlayer between existing concrete and new asphalt overlay on Old M-103.

In 2024, the county patched the existing concrete, applied a full ECR chip seal layer, overlaid it with two inches of hot mix asphalt, and followed with a standard chip seal on top. The hope: Flexibility of the rubberized interlayer – a SAMI

seal – would slow reflective cracks that can reappear quickly when asphalt is placed over concrete.

"One year in, it looks very promising," said Myland. "But we really want to see how it performs over five or six years. That's when

we'll know how well it truly works."

The project cost just under \$118,000, supported by multiple partners: \$20,000 from EGLE for the ECR, \$39,000 from the township for asphalt, and \$59,000 from SJCRC. **CRA**



Old M-103 before



Old M-103 after



## FEATURE:

# A ROAD FUNDING VICTORY, DECADES IN THE MAKING

CRA's Ed Noyola reflects on how Michigan's 2025 transportation package *finally* crossed the finish line



Tom Steinbis, CRA legislative specialist, outside the Governor's Ceremonial Office at the State Capitol.



Few people in Michigan have logged more miles on the road to transportation funding than **Ed Noyola**, CRA's chief deputy and

legislative director. Over the past 40 years, he's been at the center of three major road-funding efforts — in 1997, 2015, and 2025 — each one a marathon of negotiations, late-night sessions, and relentless advocacy.

As Michigan celebrates the latest — and biggest — transportation package in history, *Crossroads* sat down with Noyola to talk about what makes this moment different.

### The long road to 2025

For Noyola, this year's historic package brings familiar patterns — and a few firsts.

"The first two times, the House and Senate went back and forth until the Governor stepped in and wrangled everyone together," he recalled. "That's my recollection of what Gov. Engler did in 1997, and Gov. Snyder in 2015."

"This time, the Speaker came out with the plan and the Governor had long campaigned on 'Fix on the Damn Roads.' The Governor and Speaker agreed on three issues: Focus on local

roads, \$3 B total and what's collected at the pump should go to roads. "But getting the Senate on board to fund the package took a lot longer!" he said.

In the end, one tax became the linchpin: A new 24% wholesale marijuana tax. "The Senate insisted on new revenue and there was much discussion on what tax would be acceptable to the Republicans," Noyola said. "That was the marijuana tax. It was the final piece of the puzzle that put this deal together."

As lawmakers negotiated into the early hours of Oct. 3, Noyola, CRA CEO **Denise Donohue** and legislative specialist **Tom Steinbis** waited "on the tiles" outside the legislative chambers all night, tracking every bit of chatter.

"You don't have to work on the 'yes' votes," Noyola noted. "You work on the undecideds — the soft 'no's.' Sometimes it's one vote that makes all the difference. Which is exactly how this bill played out: One vote."

### The art of the marathon

The 2025 package wasn't just another legislative battle. It was an endurance test.

"When you remove sales tax from fuel and convert it to fuel tax, you

shake up a lot of people," Noyola said. "Specifically, schools and local governments. That was nearly a billion dollars in revenue to backfill."

Legislative leaders ultimately offset part of the loss to schools with the \$600 million in redirected income tax revenue that went to the MTF, beginning in 2021.

Still, the defining theme was local roads and streets. "The governor's 'Fix the Damn Roads' campaign was more about highways," said Noyola. "This time, the Legislature — both parties — focused on municipal neighborhoods, subdivisions and county roads that had been neglected for decades."



House voting on transportation package.

## CRA's fingerprints

For Noyola, the final deal reflects one of CRA's most enduring priorities: Constitutionally protected revenue for roads.

"For 22 years, that's been one of CRA's top Legislative Priorities," said Noyola. "In the 2015 package, counties gained \$600 million in income tax revenue, but it wasn't constitutionally protected — and sure enough we lost it this fall! However, the sales tax swap moves \$1 billion of new revenue into the Michigan Transportation Fund, where it's protected by the Constitution: This is huge!!"

The rest of the new revenue comes from Corporate Income Tax and marijuana tax revenue — and they are statutory (less protected).

## What it means for counties

County road agencies should see a 35% increase in funding beginning in early 2026 — and possibly up to 50% by FY 2027. "The 2026 revenue is only for three-quarters of the year, since some of the new revenue won't start until mid-year."

The challenge is readiness. "This is going to put pressure on county road agencies to plan work and projects and decide where that money will go," Noyola said. "And counties need to be ready to clearly explain to townships which revenue (MTF vs Neighborhood Roads Fund) requires local match and which doesn't. That clarity is key and probably requires new Board-level policy."

## The power of grassroots advocacy

CRA issued a late-night "call for action" to members on October 2<sup>nd</sup> as the marijuana bill was teetering — with the entire package riding on it. The member response was immediate.

"As legislators wandered in and out of their chambers, we were told they got calls from their county road commissions in the middle of the night," Noyola said. "They like hearing from lobbyists, but



Steinbis (left) and Noyola "on the tiles" at the State Capitol.



Sen. McBroom (R-Dickinson) makes an impassioned speech for passage of the new wholesale marijuana tax.

nothing makes a stronger impression than a constituent calling and saying, 'Hey, there's a bill up — where are you?' That's what helps us turn a 'maybe' into a 'yes'."

## Looking ahead

Noyola reiterated that counties must start planning now. "Start working with your townships, look at communities that haven't seen much investment, and maybe reconsider your match policies," he said.

"This isn't the finish line — it's another chapter," said Noyola. "But we're so pleased to arrive at an increase of about 50% for all 83 counties fairly."

"With fuel consumption flattening out or going down, we'll need to look at some type of mileage-based road-usage charge. Everyone paying by the mile — that's as fair as fair can get. That's the next debate — and hopefully coming soon," Noyola said. **CRA**

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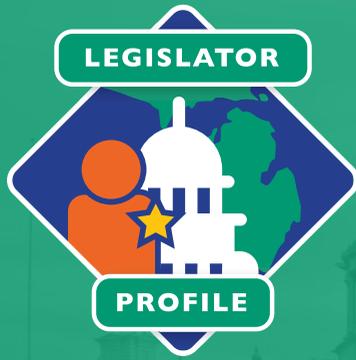


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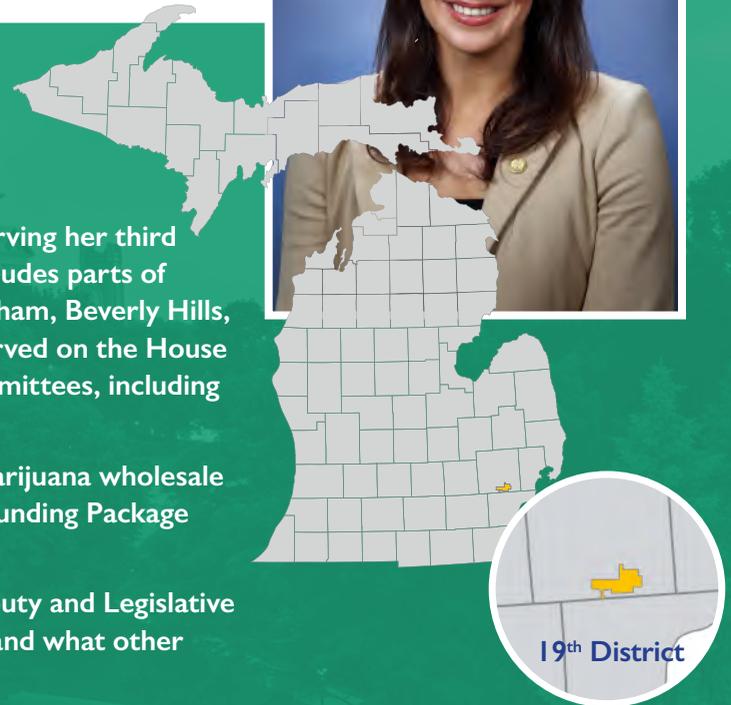


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**SAMANTHA STECKLOFF,**  
State Representative | 19<sup>th</sup> District



State Representative Samantha Steckloff (D-Oakland) is serving her third term representing Michigan’s 19<sup>th</sup> House District, which includes parts of Farmington Hills, Southfield, Bloomfield Township, Birmingham, Beverly Hills, Franklin, Bingham Farms and Southfield Township. She’s served on the House Appropriations Committee and five appropriations subcommittees, including Transportation.

Rep. Steckloff sponsored HB 4951, creating the new 24% marijuana wholesale tax – a key component of Michigan’s 2025 Transportation Funding Package and FY 2026 Budget signed in October.

Crossroads sat down with Rep. Steckloff and CRA Chief Deputy and Legislative Director Ed Noyola to talk about the road funding success and what other transportation issues have her attention.

**CRA:** First, tell us about your background and what inspired you to become a state lawmaker.

**Rep. Steckloff:** Before serving in the Legislature, I spent seven years on the Farmington Hills City Council.

One of the biggest reasons I decided to run for the House was my breast cancer diagnosis at age 31. Navigating that experience made me realize how much change is needed, and that much of it can happen at the state level.

I was also deeply interested in infrastructure from my time on the City Council. We saw firsthand the toll aging roads and underground utilities were taking on our community. I wanted to help find real, long-term solutions to protect all our communities.

My mom, Vicki Barnett, served in the Legislature from 2009 to 2014, so public service runs in the family. Though, to be fair, I like to joke that I actually got *her*

into government when I volunteered in a youth program years ago.

**CRA:** You serve on the House Appropriations Committee and several subcommittees, including Transportation. How has that shaped your perspective on infrastructure investment?

**Rep. Steckloff:** I served on the Transportation Committee during my first two terms, though not this year, but that hasn’t slowed me down. Early on, I helped form a road funding workgroup to identify where new dollars could come from. We’ve been looking at a \$3-\$4 billion annual shortfall, so it’s critical to plan for Michigan’s future.

In my district, fewer than half of our roads are rated “fair” or better, so we clearly have work to do.

**CRA:** This fall, you helped pass one of Michigan’s most significant transportation funding packages in decades. What was that experience like?

**Rep. Steckloff:** Honestly, it was an absolute honor. As a member of the minority, you have to choose your battles, but I’ve built strong relationships with leadership in both parties, and that put me in the room when the decisions were made.

We knew some kind of tax increase would be needed, so I showed up with a binder of 13 possible options. Every one of them had been vetted with stakeholders so we could move quickly if something fell through. When the 24% marijuana wholesale tax emerged as the most viable path, we were ready.

I’m deeply honored that the Governor and the Speaker entrusted me with carrying that bill. Road funding has been decades in the making, and when it finally passed, I couldn’t resist calling my mom. When I first came to

*Continued on page 25*

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Lansing, I told her I'd fix road funding, and she laughed. So, I called her and said, "See? I told you I'd fix it."

**CRA:** Passage of the new marijuana wholesale tax was touch-and-go and could have halted the entire state budget and 2025 Transportation Package had it not passed. It was a nail-biter to the end. What was going through your mind?

**Rep. Steckloff:** It really was a nail-biter. We worked with every industry we could, and the cannabis industry came to the table in good faith. Initially, we considered a retail tax, but shifting to a wholesale model made more sense and raised more revenue. I couldn't believe it when they told me it would bring in \$420 million.

We were careful to balance it with regulatory reforms the industry requested. Any time you can use a "sin tax" or a user fee, it's easier to build consensus. Legislators can't realistically vote on 13 separate increases, so this was a smart, fair solution that nearly everyone could support.

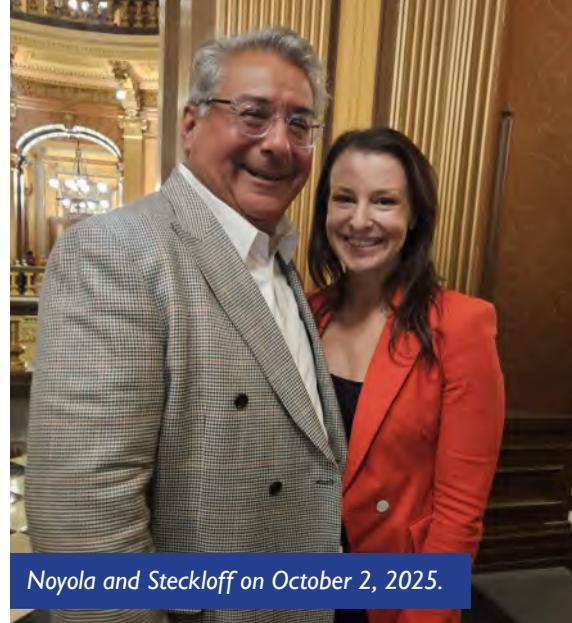
**CRA:** Some groups have already signaled plans to challenge the new tax. How confident are you it will hold up?

**Rep. Steckloff:** We ran it by every legal authority we could, and all agreed the tax should hold without the need for a higher vote threshold. We'll have to see how the court challenges play out, but in the meantime the revenue will be collected, absolutely. We're confident in its legality.

**CRA:** The FY 2026 budget includes \$7.65 M for a road user charge (RUC) study/pilot – a CRA Legislative Priority. Do you support RUC as an alternative revenue collection method for road funding?

**Rep. Steckloff:** I think road-user fees are the fairest long-term solution. We've done pilot after pilot, but at some point someone has to pull the trigger. If we don't fully invest the \$3-\$4 billion we need each year, our roads will continue to crumble.

I understand people's privacy concerns, but this isn't post-World War II anymore. The way we fund roads has to evolve.



Noyola and Steckloff on October 2, 2025.

We're elected to make tough decisions, and this is one of them.

**CRA:** Anything you'd like to add?

**Rep. Steckloff:** I just want to thank your members for their patience and persistence. This Transportation Package was decades in the making. For me personally, passage of the road funding package will stand as one of the greatest and proudest accomplishments of my career. **CRA**

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## Ask Mark...

**From your seat at the TAMC table, what's caught your attention so far?**



Mark Worden, director of public relations, Road Commission of Kalamazoo County (RCKC)

With a background that bridges both the private asphalt industry and public-sector road management, **Mark Worden**, director of public relations, **Road Commission of Kalamazoo County (RCKC)**, brings a well-rounded view of infrastructure to the Transportation Asset Management Council (TAMC).

Recently appointed to represent CRA, Worden now joins the Council's efforts to advance data-driven investment decisions across the state. *Crossroads* caught up with Mark to hear his first impressions, observations and what he hopes to contribute during his term.

**CRA:** Walk us through how the Local Road Research Program came to be?

**Mark Worden:** I've gained a new appreciation for those who started the Asset Management Council years ago. Getting the entire state to inventory and rate its infrastructure is an enormous task, something I didn't fully realize. I have tremendous respect for everyone who laid that groundwork.

**CRA:** As the CRA representative on the Council, how do you make sure the county road agency perspective is reflected at TAMC's meeting table?

**Worden:** I'm not bashful about speaking up. I make sure our voice is heard. I'm not afraid to ask a question or dig deeper when something isn't clear. I also make a point to connect with others on the Council to build relationships and ensure county perspectives are part of every discussion.

**CRA:** From the county road agency side,

what insights or priorities do you try to bring into TAMC discussions?

**Worden:** One of my biggest takeaways is the range of Michigan's 83 county road agencies – from the tip of the UP to the southern border, large and small, urban and rural. Their realities can be vastly different. It's important for the Council to understand those differences and the unique challenges road agencies face, especially when working with limited budgets and staff.

**CRA:** Your career includes both the private asphalt industry and public-sector road management. How does that mix of experience shape your contributions to TAMC?

**Worden:** Coming from both sides gives me a balanced view. From the private sector, I know the challenges contractors face when funding is uncertain. For years, we've heard that more investment is coming, but when it's delayed or falls short, companies



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hesitate to invest in people and equipment. That creates a ripple effect. When funding finally arrives, capacity lags. Having that perspective helps me frame discussions about realistic planning and long-term funding stability.

**CRA:** TAMC's mission emphasizes "informed investment decisions." From Kalamazoo's perspective, how do you see asset management influencing future road funding priorities?

**Worden:** My hope is that as more agencies embrace asset management, decisions will increasingly be guided by data — not politics or the "squeaky wheel." Using performance history and treatment data will help us make smarter,

*Continued on page 29*



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longer-term investments in our infrastructure. We're still refining this approach, but it's moving in the right direction.

**CRA:** Data collection and reporting are major parts of TAMC's work. What has surprised you most about the way Michigan uses data to guide transportation investment?

**Worden:** Maybe it shouldn't have surprised me, but I've been impressed by how TAMC's data is used to inform the Legislature. The annual report gives a clear picture of Michigan's infrastructure – where we stand, how far behind we are on investment, and what it would take to keep up.

The projections are remarkably accurate, showing the impact of different funding levels over time. Seeing that process up close has been eye-opening.

**CRA:** From your experience with RCKC, what's one example of asset management principles in action – a success story or

lesson learned that could benefit other agencies?

**Worden:** Our success with millages is a great example. Because we've consistently tracked asset conditions and treatment performance, we can clearly show residents the impact of their investment – what happens if we fund improvements and what happens if we don't. That transparency has built public trust, and it's paid off in voter support for millages and special assessments.

**CRA:** You've been recognized as a Michigan Infrastructure Council (MIC) Asset Management Champion. How does that recognition influence your approach to leadership and communication within the Council?

**Worden:** Everyone on the Council has a solid understanding of asset management principles, but the Champion program gave me added confidence. It deepened my understanding and helps me engage more effectively in discussions and

decisions about where we go next as a Council. Understanding asset management is really a prerequisite for representing CRA effectively on the Council.

**CRA:** Looking ahead, how do you hope to make an impact during your term?

**Worden:** I hope to keep promoting asset management among county road agencies and showing its benefits. Before asset management, we were often taking shots in the dark – making investment decisions without solid data.

Now, by inventorying and rating assets, tracking performance and analyzing lifecycle costs, we can make smarter, data-driven decisions. That builds confidence from the public and township partners alike. And in my experience, when people have confidence, they're much more willing to invest. **CRA**

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## AT-WILL EMPLOYMENT

### County road agency do's and don'ts

By Brett J. Miller, Shareholder, Butzel, and Jennifer Henderson, General Counsel, Road Commission for Oakland County

Employment relationships in Michigan are generally presumed to be “at-will.” At-will employment means that either the employer or the employee can terminate the employment relationship with or without notice and with or without cause. Essentially, the employer can end the relationship for any reason, as long as it is not an *unlawful* reason.

However, a clever employment attorney may claim that just about any reason for termination is “unlawful.” Michigan, for instance, prohibits discrimination based on race, religion, sex (including sexual orientation and gender identity/expression), age, color, national origin, height, weight, familial status and marital status.

Race applies to all races, including so-called “reverse discrimination”

against a white employee. There are even reverse sexual orientation claims, i.e. allegations that a gay supervisor was biased against straight subordinates. Thus, everyone in Michigan is protected by its civil rights laws.

Michigan also prohibits retaliation against employees for engaging in “protected activity.” This may include reporting discrimination or sexual harassment in the workplace. It also may involve “whistleblowing” if an employee has reported – or is about to report – a supposed violation of the law to a public body.

One of the more common claims in recent years relates to disability. Although an employee may be “at-will,” an employer has a legal duty to consider whether certain disabilities can be

accommodated and to avoid discrimination based on an actual or perceived disability.

As an example, since the COVID pandemic, there has been a huge uptick in disability accommodation requests to work remotely. In these cases, at-will employment would not excuse an employer’s legal duty to engage in the interactive process regarding an employee’s request for a disability accommodation.

At-will employers are also at risk of claims of violation of public policy, First Amendment issues (for public employers), tortious interference, defamation, or other statutory claims arising out of the payment of wages, or workplace injury. **CRA**

### Special considerations for employees governed by a collective bargaining agreement (CBA)

Usually, a CBA is very specific in regards to rendering disciplines for its members. Although every CBA is different, members can only be terminated for “just cause” and with proper due process. Under this process, the affected member is allowed to grieve the termination, receive a decision in writing from the employer and appeal the decision of the employer through private arbitration.

In discharge situations, the employer will be required to establish the discharge was for just cause and that

the proper steps were followed under the CBA or that there was sufficient cause to skip steps of progressive discipline.

**While at-will employment offers flexibility, it is not a shield against legal liability.** Michigan employers must navigate a complex landscape of statutory protections and judicial exceptions. By implementing sound HR practices and seeking legal guidance when necessary, employers can reduce the risk of costly litigation and maintain a fair, compliant workplace.

## To avoid liability employers should keep in mind the following do's and don'ts when dealing with at-will employees:

### DO...



#### **Treat employees consistently.**

Apply workplace policies uniformly across all employees. Avoid favoritism or disparate treatment that could suggest bias or pretext.



#### **Train supervisors.**

Educate managers on employment laws and proper documentation practices. Supervisors are often the first line of defense against wrongful termination claims.



#### **Tell employees why they are being terminated.**

Managers often will tell an employee that they are exer-

cising the right to terminate an employee at-will and will not provide any other information. This is not a best practice. Instead, managers should provide at least a high-level truthful explanation.



#### **Clearly document employee performance and behavioral issues.**

Maintain thorough records of employee performance, disciplinary actions and reasons for termination or other adverse employment actions. Documentation should be objective, consistent and contemporaneous. Supervisors

should document issues even if they do not relate to “formal” discipline. For instance, supervisors who are continually emailing an employee to correct errors and performance problems should forward those emails to HR to be placed in a personnel file. The legal mantra “if it’s not documented, it didn’t happen” applies to at-will employers.



#### **Consider severance agreements.**

Offering severance in exchange for a release of claims can reduce litigation risk. Ensure the agreement is voluntary and legally compliant.

### DON'T...



#### **Give false reasons for termination to spare feelings or avoid conflict.**

Some managers will tell an employee they are being laid off or their position is being eliminated to spare the employee's feelings or avoid having to deal with a difficult employee. This approach is fine if it actually is a layoff or position elimination. If, however, a manager claims to be eliminating a position only to then post the employee's job, it cannot be said to be a position elimination. Providing any untrue reason for separation, regardless of how well-meaning it may be, can be a very expensive mistake for employers.



#### **Forget to consult with counsel.**

Employers should consult with counsel to help navigate risks of any employment separation, draft severance and release agreements and help identify any other potential issues.



#### **Rely on ambiguous, outdated, or inconsistent policies.**

Employers should ensure employment documents – including offer letters, handbooks and policies – clearly state the at-will nature of employment. Avoid language that implies guaranteed job security. Further, employers should ensure that their policies

address how the employer handles complaints of workplace harassment and disability accommodation requests. Failing to have proper policies in place can lead to liability.



#### **Ignore protected status or activity.**

Before termination or other adverse employment action, assess whether the employee belongs to a protected class or has engaged in protected activity. For instance, has the employee requested a medical leave of absence recently or asked about a disability accommodation? Has the employee made any workplace complaints?

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## EVENT CALENDAR



### **2026 UPRB WINTER MEETING** • January 22–23 **REGISTRATION LIVE!**

This two-day annual meeting of the Upper Peninsula Road Builders (UPRB) Section will be held at the Holiday Inn, Marquette. Representing the 15 Upper Peninsula county road commissions, the UPRB meeting covers current issues, legislative updates and more.



### **60<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL COUNTY ENGINEERS WORKSHOP** • February 3–5

Calling all road engineers! Don't miss this three-day CRA conference organized by Michigan Tech's LTAP. Your opportunity to learn about new topics and network with colleagues at the Delta Hotels Muskegon Convention Center, Muskegon. Continuing education credits available.



### **CRA'S COMMISSIONERS IN THE CLASSROOM** • February 17 **NEW!**

Attention all commissioners! This brand-new, full-day "classroom schedule" workshop will give you the tools, tips and know-how to succeed in your role. Hit the books and compare notes with colleagues at the Comfort Inn & Suites in Mt. Pleasant.



### **2026 CRA HIGHWAY CONFERENCE & ROAD SHOW – FULL SPEED AHEAD!** • March 24–26

The 2026 Highway Conference looks to the future of transportation in Michigan following passage of the historic 2025 Transportation Funding Package. The Road Show is Michigan's biggest infrastructure trade show. Events run concurrently at the Lansing Center, Lansing.



To register and for details on all CRA events, visit [micountyroads.org/events](https://micountyroads.org/events).



# 2026 HIGHWAY CONFERENCE & ROAD SHOW **FULL SPEED AHEAD!**

## **DON'T MISS MICHIGAN'S LARGEST LOCAL ROAD EVENT**

Over 1,000 attendees from Michigan's 83 county road agencies and industry partners will gather at the 2026 CRA Highway Conference & Road Show where innovation meets opportunity.

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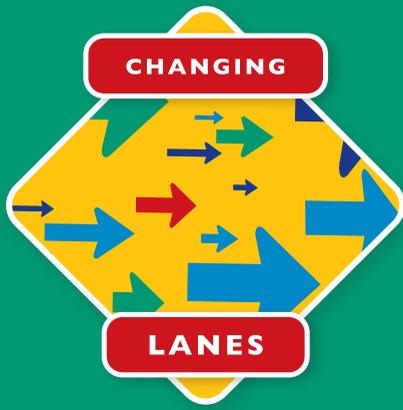
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# Key transitions at...

## Road Commissions and Departments →

**Todd Brown** is a new commissioner for the **Lenawee County Road Commission**.

**Tylene Henry** is a new commissioner for the **Road Commission for Oakland County**.

**Brittany Hinn** is the new director of administration at the **St. Joseph County Road Commission**.

The **Clinton County Road Commission** recently welcomed two new truck drivers: **Brock Baker** and **Zachary Hickok**.

**Marianna Frick** has been promoted to director of finance/human resources for the **Oceana County Road Commission**.

## Mile Markers →

**David Coates** has retired after 28 years as stock clerk for the **Ogemaw County Road Commission**.

**Lori Holmes** has retired as director of finance/human resources for the **Oceana County Road Commission**.

**Brian Kleinfeld** has retired as Gradall operator for the **Saginaw County Road Commission**.

**Mark Wineland** has retired after 26 years of service at the **Clinton County Road Commission** (CCRC). He most recently worked in CCRC's sign shop. **CRA**

Do you have a staff member you want recognized in *Crossroads*?

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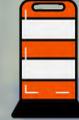
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COMMUNICATION



CORNER

## Using the holidays to fill the goodwill bank

This story came across our desk from the **Charlevoix County Road Commission** (CCRC), and we couldn't resist sharing how CCRC found a creative way to turn an old piece of equipment into a source of community joy.

"For years, CCRC's old Oshkosh plow truck, known affectionately as 'Number 45,' sat parked in a storage building, long past its prime," said CCRC Commissioner **Keith Ogden**, who provided the story. Built, or more accurately rebuilt, around 1979 after lengthy federal government service, the truck was modernized with a Cat 3406 diesel engine, new hydraulics and a refurbished dump body. Rugged and dependable, it became a fixture of the fleet through Michigan's long, snowy winters.

By the early 1990s, newer and more versatile plow trucks took over, and Number 45 was retired to "just in case" duty. Eventually, like all aging equipment, it faced a crossroads: Be auctioned off for a few hundred dollars or find another use.

Ogden said that's when the staff decided to think a little differently.

CCRC has long enjoyed a strong relationship with residents and local townships, supported by a road millage and a spirit of public connection. As the holidays approached, management saw a chance to build on that goodwill.

Instead of scrapping the old truck, they rolled it out front of the main office along a busy state highway, strung it with Christmas lights, and gave it a second retirement as a bright symbol of community pride.

At Christmas time, Number 45 brightens the roadside in front of CCRC's main office, bringing smiles to passersby and reminding the community of its road commission's history and heart.

Ogden noted that the display has received many favorable public comments. The feedback, he said, has been worth far more than what an

empty space and a few dollars from an auction would have brought.

CCRC's example offers a simple but powerful lesson in public relations: Building goodwill doesn't always require a new program or large investment. A little creativity and a fresh perspective can go a long way. Whether it's decorating a plow, hosting a community open house, or lighting up a piece of history, each effort helps fill the goodwill bank and strengthen public trust.

"Our Oshkosh may have retired twice," Ogden said, "but this second career might just be its most meaningful yet." **CRA**



CCRC's old Oshkosh plow, affectionately known as "Number 45."

# PUBLISHER'S COLUMN

# A Win-Win-Win for Michigan

BY: DENISE DONOHUE



It's truly a thrill to be writing about the **second road funding package** that has been passed during my time at CRA. The Legislature and

Governor found a way, at a time when there wasn't surplus money lying about. Two in 10 years is truly incredible – and we offer much appreciation to our elected officials for getting it done.

It takes way more than a village to get the Legislature and Governor from different political parties working on a very short deadline to agree on a \$1.85 billion package – where **54% of the dollars are set aside for counties** for the next five years, before a re-adjustment takes place.

It takes county road agencies **speaking with one voice**, providing data on their road conditions and raising awareness of the fiscal needs to best restore Michigan roads serving our residents and businesses. Thank you! I won't try to name the people, data and actions that you all took to help our elected officials pull this package across the finish line – but there were many.

Yes, we're going to dip a bit in funding for the next 2-3 months while the re-alignment and launch of new funding sources begins. We're all waiting for the government administrators to figure out collection timeline and distribution – and at the same time road agencies are updating policies to accommodate this new creature called the Neighborhood Roads Fund (NRF).

*There's more!* We're very appreciative the Legislature heard counties' case for **more dollars for local bridges**. According to MDOT data, there is a \$1 B backlog of critical, serious and weight-restricted local bridges. \$100 M per year through FY 2030 is part of the NRF, and road agencies are already putting out the call for more bridge projects.

*Even more!* The funding package also allowed **MDOT to reinstate its Local Federal Aid Buyout Program** at the full \$45 M level. Again, we are very appreciative of this move, which according to a nationally recognized multiplier allows local road agencies to get 25% more work done more quickly with full local control.

Finally, CRA is working to be part of the \$7.65 M road usage charge (RUC) pilot study-project to be conducted by MDOT over the next three years – part of the eventual future of road funding across the US. There is much to learn and explore on this topic.

A win-win-win for the Legislature, county road agencies and the driving public! And now it's really time to start planning and get to work.

*Denise Donohue*

Denise Donohue, CAE, APR  
CRA CEO  
ddonohue@micountyroads.org



CRA board members handed out 500 cups of “Rocky Road, Michigan Pothole Patch, and Safety-Orange Sherbet” ice cream at the Sept. 9th “Fund Our Roads” rally at the State Capitol. Pictured left to right: Scott Merillat (Lenawee); Burt Thompson (Antrim); CRA Board president Jerry Byrne (Kent); and Lansing Mayor Andy Schor.

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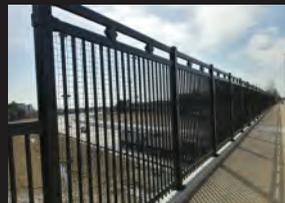
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