

Letting locals borrow would narrow repair gap

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By Journal Editorial Board

Though no Flint-area bridge has collapsed to get our attention, at least 20 spans in Genesee County are degraded to the point where they need repair or replacement. It is work that should be done sooner rather than later for both safety and cost reasons.

Unfortunately, later is the only option for most of them with the current level of state funding, as Michigan's tax on fuel remains inadequate to keep roads in good repair.

However, pending legislation in Lansing would boost the available cash for bridge work, without a larger levy, by letting cities and local road commissions borrow against future revenues. The state Senate has passed this bill and the House should follow suit.

It really is a no-brainer, as Genesee road commission chief John Daly says. While borrowing money would cost 4 percent or a bit more in interest payments annually, construction prices are rising 6 to 8 percent a year. Therefore, the faster the bridges can be repaired, the cheaper it would be.

As it is, the county takes precautions with the bridges needing work by posting weight restrictions. In the two worst cases, bridges are closed, including one on Lovejoy Road in Argentine Township that has been shut for five years. In Lapeer County, three bridges are out of use, though the county has a small tax supporting their upkeep.

Clearly, this infrastructure decay will only grow worse. In Genesee County alone, the local bridge bill totals tens of millions or more. Repairs needed on state highway spans maintained by the Michigan Department of Transportation raise the total much higher. And for the nation, civil engineers put the tab at \$188 billion.

Is it any wonder then that of the nearly 1,100 structurally deficient local bridges in Michigan that cities and road commissions maintain, only 50 to 60 annually get any funding.

Obviously, there's a strong case for giving cities and road commissions the ability to borrow to make a little headway on this backlog. However getting such useful authority from Lansing is but a small part of the remedy, as a large funding gap would remain that the present level of taxation will never span.
