

Hills lists improvements for county roads

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"FARMINGTON HILLS is a very good example of land use development growing at such a tremendous pace," said Dennis Pajot, the road commission's public information officer.

State officials are excited over the prospect of a new Mazda auto manufacturing plant in Flat Rock and concerned about the need for new roads and other capital improvements in that area, said Farmington Hills City Manager William Costick.

But Oakland County's development and resulting problems far outstrip the construction of one auto plant, Costick said.

"Farmington Hills, Southfield and Troy have (in effect) four or five Mazda plants being built — with the same road problems — plus all the residential growth. And there's no outside assistance. We are trying to put pressure on the county and state to do something," he said.

But money, or the lack of it, is the overwhelming obstacle in a county where it's no secret the road system is in disrepair. "I cannot tell you what the needs are," Pajot said. "That's what we are trying to find out. But \$100 million certainly is not liberal."

IN THE road commission's 1985-86 budget, though, only approximately \$16.9 million is available for improvements on 2,350 miles of roads under the county's jurisdiction. Another \$16 million to \$17 million is allocated for road maintenance and \$2 million to \$3 million for administration and overhead. The total annual budget is approximately \$31 million to \$41 million.

To make matters worse, "there isn't any possibility of vastly increasing funding from the state or federal governments," Pajot said.

The county road commission's top priority is safety improvements. The second priority in determining which roads are improved is the availability of money. "We gave up on our goal of ever making the system adequate," Pajot said.

But Pajot is quick to add that the county's lack of money for major roads is nothing new. It began long ago.

The state didn't recognize Oakland County as an urban county until 1972. With increased growth between the end of World War II and 1972, Oakland County's road system only grew worse. "So we have been behind the eight-ball since the word go," Pajot said.

BECAUSE THE county road commission receives its greatest bulk of money from Public Act 51 gas and weight taxes, many outside factors have affected road financing, Costick said.

First, the county is still recovering from the fuel crisis of the mid-1970s. Revenue is based on gallons. And motorists were using less gasoline and were buying cars boasting fuel economy and lighter weight. As a result, the county was receiving less gas and weight tax revenue.

Adding to the problem was the recession of the early 1980s, Costick said. "But when it comes to roads, everything involves gasoline. The price of gasoline certainly is higher, construction costs (in part because of oil costs) increased, as well as the cost of parts and labor."

"The point is, costs were going up and revenue going down. We were behind anyway. Now we are very behind on road construction. It's not a criticism of the county. It is a fact of life."

WITH LESS money than is needed for road improvements, county road officials decided the best avenue would be to personally contact mayors, supervisors and city managers in the county's 61 communities to help determine what should be done.

"We know how limited our resources are now. So we opened a dialogue with the communities," Pajot said.

Road commission staff have asked community officials "what they foresee 5-10 years, what their needs are and what can be done."

When the staff completes discussions with all communities, a report will be developed and made public — probably in January, Pajot said.

"They have gone out and surveyed. We let them know of our frustration. But they already know of our frustrations," Costick said.

Farmington officials have not scheduled yet a meeting with road commission staff.

DOLAN'S LETTER to the road commission calls for commissioners to take a strong leadership role in securing financing for major road improvements and suggests a "major, multimillion-

dollar, countywide bond issue and the aggressive procurement of additional state and federal assistance" to pay for needed projects.

Other improvements needed in Farmington Hills, according to Dolan's letter, include:

- Extending Northwestern Highway from Orchard Lake to Maple in West Bloomfield Township.

- Additional interchanges off I-695 into Farmington Hills to relieve traffic congestion at the Orchard Lake interchange.

- Widening Middlebelt from 14 Mile to Grand River.

- Widening the Grand River overpass at M-102 near Halsted.

"As you can see, this brief list of projects would add up to a multimillion-dollar program of improvements in Farmington Hills alone. We recognize the financial constraints that have been experienced by the Oakland County Road Commission," Dolan wrote.

IN THE city's response to the road commission's questionnaire, Costick offered five suggestions for increasing road funding to meet the city's improvement needs. They include:

- Working cooperatively with other Oakland County officials to develop a plan to obtain substantial increase in county general funds.

- Working with the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT)

and the Michigan Department of Commerce to obtain additional state funding and support for the city's "tremendous rate of economic development and resultant road demands."

- Providing leadership to congressional representatives and other local officials so additional federal grant dollars can be obtained.

- Working with Oakland County Executive Daniel Murphy and county commissioners to develop a bond program to provide relief to the road system.

- Working with local officials to form a partnership with private developers and corporations to seek solutions to immediate road funding.

"WITH ALL the growth going on in Oakland County, especially southern Oakland County, we need a large influx of dollars. We try to garner as much federal money as possible," Costick said.

What county and city officials have been doing recently is trying to secure matching grants through the Federal Aid to Urban Systems program. Under the matching grant, the federal government provides 75 percent of the cost of a project. The remaining 25 percent local share is to be borne equally by Oakland County and the local community.

But because of the county road commission's lack of money, Farmington Hills, for example, has been picking up the county's 12.5 percent share, Costick said. The city's current widening project on 12 Mile, between Orchard Lake and Farmington Road is an example.

The city is picking up a 25 percent share of costs — including the county's share — for the 12 million project.

"We could make the logical argument that Oakland County is growing at a faster pace and road problems are so serious that there ought to be some relief provided," Costick said.

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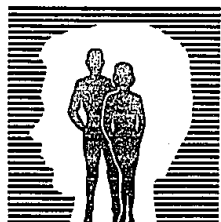
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