

Officials say road aid plans fall short of Oakland's need

BY TODD WICKS
STAFF WRITER

According to some Oakland County road officials, Governor John Engler's road repair plans for 1997-98 are as effective as Band-aids for a headache.

In his State of the State address last week, Engler proposed spending about \$400 million on state and local roads and bridges in the next two years. He also revealed plans to seek \$200 million from the federal government to continue improvements.

On Thursday Engler is expected to propose spending another \$43 million on state roads, drawn from department savings in the general fund.

County road officials certainly appreciate the help, but some believe that the governor's plans aren't nearly enough.

"I've got about \$1.5 billion (worth) of needs out there," said Brent Bair, managing director and secretary/clerk of the Road Commission of Oakland County. "Reconstruction of existing roads, the paving of roads, widening roads to handle congestion. . . We've been underfunded for decades, and you just can't solve the problem with a few million here and a few million there."

According to Bair, such funds won't do much to alleviate the county's worsening

pothole problem.

"They're showing up more and more, because the pavement is getting old and cracking," he said. "The frequency of the freeze and thaw makes it worse. It would be best for us if everything froze Dec. 1 and thawed April 1. You have something like that further north, and that's why their roads hold up longer. But they also don't have the traffic we do."

He said it's too early to tell if the road commission will have any funds left over after this winter to make its own improvements.

"We still have two of our worst months ahead of us," he noted. "We were in the red last winter."

The \$200 million Engler hopes to receive from the government would come from increased returns on Michigan residents' federal gas taxes. Ron DeCook, deputy director of the County Road Association of Michigan, doubts that idea will become a reality.

"Depending on the federal government to bail the state out, I don't think we can expect much from that," he said. "But we'll work with the governor and Legislature to find a long-term solution."

DeCook noted that the additional millions Engler is allotting for improvements next year is actually the amount

usually spent each year.

"Realistically, (these funds) will make very little difference," he said. "It's a help, but it's not a solution. The public will continue to see deterioration in the entire transportation system because this is just not enough."

But Robin Pannecouk, spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), praised Engler. "This is a definite demonstration of commitment on the part of the governor," she said. "Typically, general fund money is not allocated for transportation."

Because many of the funds are for the 1998 fiscal year, Pannecouk said it is too early to determine which roads in Oakland County will be improved.

If the governor announces a \$43 million proposal Thursday as expected, it will eventually go before the state Legislature.

Although he praised the governor for recognizing the roads problem and being open to ideas, DeCook disagreed with this latest proposal.

"That's taxpayer money from the entire state," he said. "You're picking winners and losers as to what roads are going to get fixed, not based on priority."

"That money should be shared in the system, not just for state roads."

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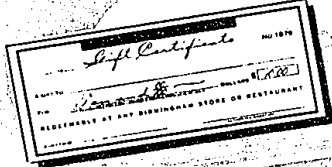
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