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Fixing roads trumps building new ones

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The Agency of Transportation has laid out an ambitious agenda that focuses on repairing the state's bridges, roads and culverts to head off catastrophic failure of our roads. The initiative, folded into Gov. Jim Douglas' "Affordability Agenda," makes sense. By the agency's calculations, it costs one-tenth as much to shore up a failing culvert now than to replace it after a collapse.

System preservation -- as the agency calls it -- is a major task. The state has nearly 980 large culverts that are more than 30 years old, 89 of them in serious enough condition to warrant a look at least every two years; plus 450 state- and town-owned bridges that are structurally deficient. The list of culverts and bridges that require immediate attention will only grow in the years to come.

The transportation agenda is ambitious -- not so much for its scope, but for facing the political consequences of putting fixes ahead of new projects -- many cherished by communities and their representatives in the Legislature.

It gets worse for fans of new construction.

The agency wants to hold off on such things as environmental studies until the funding for a new project is secure. No sense paying for something, Transportation Secretary Neale Lunderville says, that is out of date by the time the project is set to start because the requirements have changed.

The agency also wants to drop the bells and whistles from many road projects -- antique street lights, burying utility lines and premium landscaping -- to control costs. There's nothing wrong with these amenities, Lunderville says. They just shouldn't be paid for out of the transportation budget. What would the Shelburne Road expansion have looked like if it had been built under these conditions?

No projects have been canceled, Lunderville says. Many have been pushed back. That's something that won't sit too well with the locals.

Rutland got the bad news Monday. Douglas told a Rutland Region Chamber of Commerce breakfast that the region will have to wait longer for the transportation projects it wants -- namely \$85 million in improvements to U.S. 7 between Pittsford and Brandon. The governor gave weight to his resolve by delivering the news himself.

The transportation agenda, like all budget decisions, is about choices. The agency is on the right path by choosing to spend money now to preserve roads and bridges in order to head off collapse and a much bigger bill in the near future. It will be interesting to see how long the politicians outside of Montpelier let this go on.