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## Bridges crumble as money dwindles

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On a typical day in Richmond, traffic backs up first on one side of the Bridge Street bridge, then on the other, as motorists wait for a green light to cross the span, narrowed to one lane for the past 18 months because the bridge is decaying.

Although the bridge is relegated to half its function, it ranks just 99th out of 1,609 town-owned bridges on Vermont's priority list and could be years away from reaching the top of the roster of bridges awaiting state help. Chittenden County alone has 26 bridges listed as "structurally deficient." Vermont bridges rank ninth-worst in the nation for the percentage listed as structurally deficient.

A culvert under Interstate 89 in South Burlington underwent emergency replacement last year at a cost of \$2.7 million. More timely repairs might have cost only \$250,000, but because of budget constraints those repairs were not made.

"We've come to this point because we haven't been spending the money on rehab," Transportation Secretary Neale Lunderville said. "For decades we have underfunded the maintenance of roads, bridges and culverts."

Legislators and the Douglas administration say that needs to change. The 2008 transportation budget reflected an 82 percent increase in money for bridge and culvert maintenance, and Gov. Jim Douglas' proposed 2009 budget, due out Jan. 22, will show even more spending on maintenance, Lunderville said.

How much money the state needs to spend and where the money will come from, however, will be a source of debate this legislative session.

For starters, many agree it's time to turn to bonding transportation projects, something Vermont hasn't done much in recent years.

"I'm not opposed to bonding for projects that have a useful life as long as the term of debt," Douglas said.

"From an economic perspective it makes a certain amount of sense," state Treasurer Jeb Spaulding said. "If we can minimize the degradation of our infrastructure by addressing it sooner rather than later, the taxpayers will pay less."

Douglas said he expects to propose using some general obligation bonding for transportation, but he's adamantly against raising the state's debt load by going beyond the state's \$55 million bond ceiling or tapping into a new revenue source.

Spaulding and some lawmakers, however, are dubious that there will be room under the state's bond ceiling, given other construction needs that include a backlog of school projects, a new mental hospital and a new state office building in Bennington.

House Transportation Committee Chairman Rich Westman, R-Cambridge, also contends the administration is underestimating the amount of money needed. What, then, are the options?

Rent out the state's lottery. That proposal, which has been floated by the Douglas administration, would generate \$56 million, half of which the governor wants to spend on school construction, potentially leaving room under the ceiling to issue general obligation bonds for transportation projects.

Leasing the lottery to a company that might push for more people to play raises some eyebrows, however. "I don't sense a great appetite in the Legislature to increase our reliance on the lottery," said House Speaker Gaye Symington, D-Jericho.

Senate President Pro Tempore Peter Shumlin, D-Windham, more bluntly called leasing the lottery a bad idea. "It's not responsible leadership to recommend a horrible idea and then say, 'If the Legislature doesn't like it they have to come up with \$50 million,'" he said. "If we want to get more money from gaming and gambling, it seems to me we should have an honest discussion in Vermont about that."

**OPT FOR A REVENUE BOND.** The House Transportation Committee heard a pitch last month from Citigroup, which suggested a revenue bond could pay for specific road projects. Such a bond would have to be supported by a targeted revenue, such as an increase in the gas tax. Douglas, who helped defeat an increase in the gas tax two years ago, said he is flatly opposed to that. So is Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Richard Mazza, D-Grand Isle/Chittenden.

Spaulding is not so quick to discount it. "I know some people said it's off the table, but I don't think anything should be taken off the table," he said. "A significant portion of the gas tax is paid by out-of-staters."

**TAKE OUT A GARVEE BOND.** These Grant Anticipation Revenue Vehicle bonds are borrowed against future federal transportation funds, but would count against the state's debt load. "Garvees offer no unique advantage," Lunderville said.

**CLAIM ALL TRANSPORTATION MONEY.** This year, the state will use about \$30 million from the transportation fund to help pay for the Vermont State Police and shift \$27.6 million from the purchase-and-use tax on motor vehicles to the education fund. The shift rankles some who argue that transportation money should pay only for transportation needs. However, if the money doesn't come from the transportation fund and the purchase-and-use tax, it will have to come from somewhere else.

"It would be extremely difficult" to find money elsewhere, said House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Martha Heath, D-Westford. In addition, she said there are good arguments for using the money as planned because the state police patrol the roads and money from the purchase and use tax was always intended to help fund education.

**LEVY A TOLL.** Pennsylvania last year decided to add a toll to Interstate 80, much of it to be collected electronically. Citigroup representatives told the House Transportation Committee that Vermont's relative lack of traffic makes this a less viable option.

**SHIFT THE TRAFFIC TO RAIL.** Beefing up the rail lines for freight and passengers along Vermont's western corridor is in the long-term plan, but it will take time for the traffic shift to reduce the wear and tear on highways. "We're getting closer," Mazza said. "I'd like to see it in four or five years."

**LEASE THE ROADS.** In 2005, Chicago signed a 99-year, \$1.8 billion agreement to give control of the Chicago Skyway to a private firm. It's a concept that, like leasing the lottery, raises concerns about yielding local control, prompting many municipalities to reject the idea.

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**UPCOMING ROADWORK** Some of the Chittenden County road projects expected to be included in the fiscal year 2009 budget that takes effect July 1: **INTERSTATE 89:** Paving of 4 miles of highway in the north and south lanes between exits 13 and 16 (Burlington-Colchester) for \$4.3 million; paving of eight miles northbound only between exits 11 and 13 (Richmond-South Burlington). **BURLINGTON WATERFRONT:** Pedestrian walkways and parking lot access improvements near the Leahy Center for Lake Champlain, \$1.1 million. **BURLINGTON CHURCH STREET:** Pedestrian walkway improvements to parking garage, improved access from side streets, \$1.9 million. **BURLINGTON INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT:** Land acquisition and drainage for improvements to cargo and corporate customer service and parking for planes needing customs assistance, \$4.4 million. **ESSEX JUNCTION:** Road widening, parking, landscaping and sidewalks for Vermont routes 15, 117 and 2A, \$1 million. **HINESBURG:** Reconstruction of the Silver Street/Vermont 116 intersection, \$181,000. **MILTON:** Mile-long sidewalk on U.S. 7 south of the village, \$408,000.