

# Think bigger than road repairs

By Scott Clein

Nearly anyone who has driven on Michigan roads would agree that we need to repair our infrastructure, and I applaud Gov. Rick Snyder's call to action to fix our roads and bridges.



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However, right now, the focus is entirely on how we are going to raise the \$1.2 billion a year. Missing from the discussion is why we should increase funding and how we

should use these funds to maximize our return on investment.

In short, no one has described the proposal adequately enough to inspire Michiganders to support paying higher gas taxes and increased vehicle registration fees. I fear this issue will be degraded into a partisan debate about taxes, the middle class and transit funding, while completely obscuring the bigger picture: An increased investment in our infrastructure will simultaneously stimulate economic development while improving overall quality of life.

Properly designed and constructed streets make life better in a number of ways. From reducing crashes to providing a "cool" place for people to meet and interact, streets can bring life to a city like few other public works. If you don't believe me, walk down Michigan Avenue in Chicago or Lexington Avenue in Manhattan and count

the number of restaurants, shops and people. Compare those examples to roads in southeast Michigan that have ballooned to nine-lane widths and provide little, if any, sidewalks, let alone tree cover or aesthetics.

Upgrading our infrastructure may very well reduce insurance rates and limit wear and tear on our vehicles, but it can and will do more if done properly.

People often choose where to live before they obtain a job. Many of those people are basing this decision on the condition and vitality of our cities. A community that has a modern transportation network, including public transit, will be in a better position to capture and keep

young talent, thereby increasing the likelihood of spinoff development.

Even if we agree on why we would consider an increased investment in our roads, we must properly tackle how we plan to do it if we are to be successful. Michigan has the opportunity to, in the words of the governor, "reinvent itself" by setting a standard for the rest of the nation to follow.

Going forward, we must ensure that new transportation funding, regardless of the amount, is spent in a manner that is consistent with the future visions of our communities. That means increasing local control of this money and allowing communities to use them in line with their master plans,

instead of being overshadowed by the influence of Lansing or Washington.

In 2010, Michigan passed two pieces of legislation adopting the complete streets philosophy, which incorporates bicycle riders, pedestrians, transit and other alternative transportation modes with traditional motorized vehicles. However, policymakers have had little statewide success in implementing procedures to design and operate our roads for all users, regardless of age or ability.

Detroit, in fact, has led the way by designating more than 20 miles of on-street bike lanes on oversized streets, while improving barrier-free access on its sidewalks. The cities of Ferndale and Birmingham, long supporters of walkable communities, are expected to include the complete streets philosophy in their master plans. This is all wonderful stuff, but is very piecemeal.

In typical Michigan fashion, we still lack an all-encompassing transportation policy that supports the changing tenets of good design. We should urge Michigan lawmakers to look beyond how the money will be raised. It's an opportunity to create a policy that addresses why we are doing this in the first place: to provide the proper infrastructure that will make Michigan a world-class state in which to live, work and play.

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GIFFELS-WEBSTER

A 2008 artist rendering of an updated streetscape in Detroit.