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Weather, budgets taking toll on Iowa's secondary roads

Iowans travel nearly 15 million miles a day on a network of roads and bridges that is crumbling before their eyes.

Weather, lack of funding and skyrocketing materials costs contribute to the challenge of maintaining the secondary-road system's 89,610 miles of roads and more than 19,200 bridges, some dating to the 1800s.

"We're on a truly unsustainable course," said Buchanan County Engineer Brian Keierleber. It's a "vicious downward spiral" of a lack of funds to maintain secondary roads that are being worn down by more traffic and heavier vehicles than they were designed to carry.

Funding for the secondary-road system has remained relatively flat. In Fayette County, Engineer JD King said his department has received \$1.3 million a year in property taxes since 1980. This year, it received \$1.6 million.

Statewide, property taxes account for a third or more of secondary-road funds. Those revenues grew about 8 percent in 10 years. The Road Use Tax Fund generates a slightly smaller portion of the funding. It used to grow about 4.5 percent annually, according to the Iowa Department of Transportation, but just 1.5 percent since 2001.

Spending on secondary roads by Iowa's 99 counties grew from \$351 million in 1999 to \$443 million in 2008, said Steve DeVries of the county engineers' service bureau. However, the buying power decreased to \$293 million.

Fuel costs are up 170 percent in five years. Petroleum-based asphalt jumped from \$150 a ton three years ago to about \$500 a ton, after spiking to \$830, Keierleber said. A concrete overlay that cost \$163,000 a mile 10 years ago now costs \$240,000 a mile, he said.

In many cases, engineers have turned to "short-term fixes for long-term problems," Winneshiek County Engineer Lee Bjerke said.

Rather than a 7.5-inch concrete overlay that might last for 30 years, for example, counties are patching and sealing cracks and applying seal coats that they hope will preserve the surface for five to seven years.

Engineers say they see more rural residents commuting to off-farm jobs in Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, Dubuque and other communities. For them, waiting a day for snow removal is out of the question.

And many roads were designed 25 or more years ago when no one anticipated the traffic hauling huge, heavy components for wind farms or the weight and number of trucks delivering grain to ethanol plants, said DOT Secondary Roads Engineer LeRoy Bergmann.

Fortunately, county engineers have become masters at stretching their budgets. Keierleber has reused railroad flatbed cars to build bridges. Bjerke's crews salvage beams from the few bridges they replace and use them to reinforce other bridges. Last winter, King trucked in used kosher salt from a Postville meat processor to mix with sand and apply to county roads.

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"We had to get that blessed by the Department of Natural Resources, even though it had already been blessed by a rabbi," he said.

The cost of road salt is no laughing matter, though. It's jumped from \$45 a ton a few years ago to more than \$150 a ton.

He also offset staggering overtime costs from the winter of 2008 by giving employees comp time during "maintenance slowdowns" scheduled around Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day. That saved between \$7,000 and \$9,000 in labor costs and as much as \$18,000 in fuel while equipment sat idle.

This summer, Keierleber is forgoing the annual centerline and edge line painting to have money for other projects, including the county match on a resurfacing project paid for largely with federal stimulus dollars.

The federal dollars are funding many of the larger secondary-road projects in Iowa this year, Bergmann said. Counties welcome the stimulus money and state I-JOBS funds, he said, "but they know those funds will be gone in a year or two."

The county engineers have a solution: Raise the fuel tax.

"Despite what the governor says, we need to raise the gas tax," King said. He even has a campaign slogan: "It's time for a dime."

Gov. Chet Culver ruled out a gas tax increase this year and has already said he would veto a gas tax if lawmakers send him one in 2010 when he is up for re-election.

Perhaps the governor doesn't know what the county engineers are up against, Bjerke said.

"I offered the governor the opportunity to ride Winneshiek County roads, and he hasn't taken me up," he said. "I even offered to buy him lunch."