

Gearing up for road repairs

By **JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer** | Posted: **Tuesday, January 3, 2017 6:00 am**

People traveling in Michigan will be paying more at the pump in 2017, but highway experts are pleased that the additional revenue will begin to fund long-delayed road repairs.

According to their surveys, they really need it.

As of Jan. 1, the state gasoline tax increased by 7.3 cents and the diesel tax went up 11.3 cents, putting both to 26.3 cents per gallon. This gives Michigan the fifth-highest gas taxes in the nation.

There are automatic annual inflationary adjustments planned in 2022 and after. Vehicle registration fees also increased by 20 percent in 2016. It's part of a \$1.2 billion road funding package passed by the Michigan Legislature in 2015 and taking effect this year.

The road funding bill calls for \$600 million in additional gas tax and vehicle registration fees annually by 2018, and then a gradual increase to \$600 million from the state General Fund beginning in 2019.

The plan legally requires \$150 million in general fund dollars to be added to the \$600 million in gas tax and vehicle registrations in 2019, adding up to \$1.2 billion by 2021.

Denise Donohue, with the County Road Association of Michigan, said the new road revenue marks the first actual increase in state road funding in 20 years.

And as far as the state's engineers are concerned, it's not a minute too soon.

The state has 120,000 miles of roads. At present only 18 percent of Michigan's federal aid roads are in good condition.

Closer to home, things aren't in any better shape, according to a local road report.

The Twin Cities Area Transportation Study, released in November, showed that in 2009-10, 22 percent of the roadways in St. Joseph-Benton Harbor, or 32 miles, were found to be in good shape, and 30 percent, or 49 miles, were in fair shape.



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The sign at the Citgo station at Niles Avenue and I-94 reflects the higher gas prices being paid by Michigan motorists in 2017. Part of the jump is an increase in the gas tax, that is part of a package to funnel more money into road repairs that begins this year and will be fully funded by 2021.

For 2015-16, engineers found that only 8.25 miles were in good shape, representing 5 percent, and 70 percent, or 114 miles, were in poor shape. One-quarter of the roads, or 40 miles, are in fair shape.

Roads deemed to be in good shape require only routine maintenance, while those in fair shape require preventative maintenance, according to the study. Those in poor shape need extensive structural repairs.

Routine maintenance costs around \$5,000 a mile, while more in-depth repairs can run as much as \$200,000 to \$400,000 a mile. And the costs go up every year work is delayed.

The TwinCATs report showed that spending \$1 on preserving pavement before it drops below the “fair” mark saves or delays spending between \$6 to \$14 on reconstruction once it reaches the “poor” stage.

The County Road Association of Michigan reports that more money for road work will be provided to communities in 2017 through the Michigan Transportation Fund. The following list shows the actual amount received in 2015, and the estimated increase for the current fiscal year:

- Baroda – \$73,668/\$15,331
- Benton Harbor – \$761,053/\$180,214
- Berrien Springs – \$129,307/\$30,501
- Bridgman – \$180,72742,013
- Buchanan – \$352,055/\$83,035
- Coloma – \$123,320/29,085
- Eau Claire – \$55,443/\$13,076
- New Buffalo – \$197,334/\$46,541
- Niles – \$827,162/\$191,427
- South Haven – \$395,631/\$93,307
- St. Joseph – \$566,523/\$133,635
- Stevensville – \$109,096/25,728
- Three Oaks – \$114,684/\$27,052
- Watervliet – \$131,201/\$30,946

The new taxes aren't the only thing driving up fuel costs. Gas prices here are about 50 cents higher than this time last year, and are expected to continue to climb in 2017, possibly as high as \$3 a gallon.

But if consumers experience a bit of a hole in their wallets, at least there shouldn't be as many potholes along the roadways.

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