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### Funding

**Wisconsin has fewer sources of transportation revenue than six other midwestern states.**

While Wisconsin is in the middle of the midwestern states in state highway spending, it relies on a narrower funding base. Like the six other midwestern states shown in Table 22, Wisconsin supports its transportation program with federal revenue, state fuel taxes, and vehicle registration fees. However, Wisconsin relies solely on bonding to supplement these funding sources. The supplementary funding sources of the other midwestern states include general purpose revenue, tolls, and additional transportation-related sales and excise taxes.

Table 22

Supplemental Transportation Funding Sources, by Midwestern State<sup>1</sup>  
FY 2002-03

	Illinois	Indiana	Iowa	Michigan	Minnesota	Ohio	Wisconsin
Bonding	■	■		■	■	■	■
General Purpose Revenue	■		■	■	■	■	
Tolls	■	■		■		■	
Vehicle Sales Tax			■	■	■		
* Sales Tax on Fuel Purchases	■			■			
Excise Tax		■					
Dedicated Sales Tax		■					

<sup>1</sup> Funding sources other than federal revenue, state fuel taxes, and vehicle registration fees.

As noted, fuel taxes and vehicle registration fees are Wisconsin's two largest sources of state transportation revenue, and Wisconsin's fuel tax rate of 31.5 cents per gallon of gasoline or diesel fuel is the highest in the nation. Table 23 shows gasoline tax rates in Wisconsin and six other midwestern states. Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana also assess a sales tax on fuel purchases, and a portion of these states' revenues from that tax support transportation projects.

Table 23

**Per Gallon Gasoline Tax Rates, by Midwestern State**  
June 2003

State	State Fuel Tax for Gasoline	Sales Tax	Environmental Tax <sup>1</sup>	Total
Wisconsin	28.5¢	–	3.0¢	31.5¢
Michigan	19.0	8.8¢	0.9	28.7
Illinois	19.0	8.1	1.1	28.2 <sup>2</sup>
Indiana	18.0	8.0	0.8	26.8
Ohio	22.0	–	–	22.0
Iowa	20.1	–	1.0	21.1
Minnesota	20.0	–	–	20.0

<sup>1</sup> In Wisconsin, this tax funds the PECFA program.

<sup>2</sup> Chicago adds a 14.2¢ local tax that is not included in this total.

***Wisconsin's truck registration fees are generally at the midpoint for midwestern states.***

As shown in Table 24, Wisconsin's truck registration fees generally fall in the middle of the range of fees assessed by midwestern states. In addition to the fees shown, Wisconsin charges \$18 annually for tractor trailers, regardless of their weight.

Table 24

**Truck Registration Fees, by Midwestern State**  
 April 2003

	Truck Weight		
	20,000 Pounds	40,000 Pounds	80,000 Pounds
Illinois	\$490	\$1,202	\$2,790
Indiana	185	516	966
Iowa	235	675	1,695
Michigan	491	874	1,660
Minnesota	190	595	1,760
Ohio	218	421	824
Wisconsin	274	709	1,970

***Wisconsin's passenger vehicle registration fee is among the lowest in the Midwest.***

Wisconsin's passenger vehicle registration fee, however, is among the lowest in the Midwest. Midwestern states calculate passenger vehicle registration fees differently. For example, Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin assess a uniform fee on all vehicles, whereas Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, and Minnesota calculate fees based on a vehicle's value, age, or weight. Furthermore, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin allow local governments to assess additional taxes that fund transportation projects. Indiana allows counties to assess an additional fee based on a vehicle's value, and Ohio allows local governments to assess a flat fee up to \$20. Currently, two Wisconsin local governments assess a local tax, which is \$10 in Beloit and \$6 in Sheboygan.

Because some of the midwestern states in our comparison do not assess uniform registration fees, Table 25 compares fees for new and used luxury, mid-size, and economy cars as of June 2003. Since that time, Wisconsin's passenger vehicle registration fee has increased to \$55. Nevertheless, it remains one of the lowest in the Midwest.

Table 25  
**Passenger Vehicle Registration Rates, by Midwestern State<sup>1</sup>**  
 June 2003

	Illinois	Indiana <sup>2</sup>	Iowa	Michigan	Minnesota	Ohio <sup>3</sup>	Wisconsin <sup>4</sup>
<b>Current Model Year</b>							
Luxury	\$78	\$508	\$355	\$173	\$423	\$43	\$45
Mid-size	78	381	243	123	296	43	45
Economy	78	227	140	78	183	43	45
<b>Three-Year-Old Cars</b>							
Luxury	78	389	355	129	106	43	45
Mid-size	78	291	243	93	106	43	45
Economy	78	177	140	59	106	43	45
<b>Six-Year-Old Cars</b>							
Luxury	78	224	272	129	106	43	45
Mid-size	78	166	186	93	106	43	45
Economy	78	115	108	59	106	43	45
<b>Nine-Year-Old Cars</b>							
Luxury	78	79	35	129	106	43	45
Mid-size	78	77	35	93	101	43	45
Economy	78	76	35	59	67	43	45

<sup>1</sup> The luxury vehicle is a Ford Expedition, the mid-size car is a Ford Taurus, and the economy car is a Ford Focus.

<sup>2</sup> Includes the tax charged by Indianapolis.

<sup>3</sup> Includes the \$20 tax charged by Columbus.

<sup>4</sup> This fee increased to \$55 in October 2003.

### Highway Condition

Two commonly accepted measures of highway condition are:

- levels of traffic congestion; and
- pavement condition.

***Wisconsin's traffic congestion levels compare favorably with other midwestern states'.***

As shown in Table 26, Wisconsin's traffic congestion levels compare favorably with those of other midwestern states. Only two of the states in our comparison—Iowa and Minnesota—had greater percentages of state highway miles with low congestion levels, based on Federal Highway Administration data.

Table 26

**Percentage of State Highway Miles with Low Congestion Levels, by Midwestern State and Nationally 2001**

	Percentage
Iowa	96.3%
Minnesota	83.3
Wisconsin	79.9
Illinois	78.6
Indiana	72.7
Michigan	66.8
Ohio	62.1
National Average	74.0

***Both traffic congestion levels and pavement quality began to improve in 1998.***

As shown in Figure 6, the percentage of Wisconsin's state highways with low levels of congestion was relatively constant from 1993 through 1998, but increased thereafter. Pavement conditions also improved after 1998, when Wisconsin began to receive increased federal highway funding as a result of the federal Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As shown in Figure 7, the percentage of state highway miles with good or excellent pavement condition increased from 30.3 percent in 1998 to 57.5 percent in 2001.

Figure 6

Percentage of Wisconsin State Highway Miles with Low Levels of Congestion

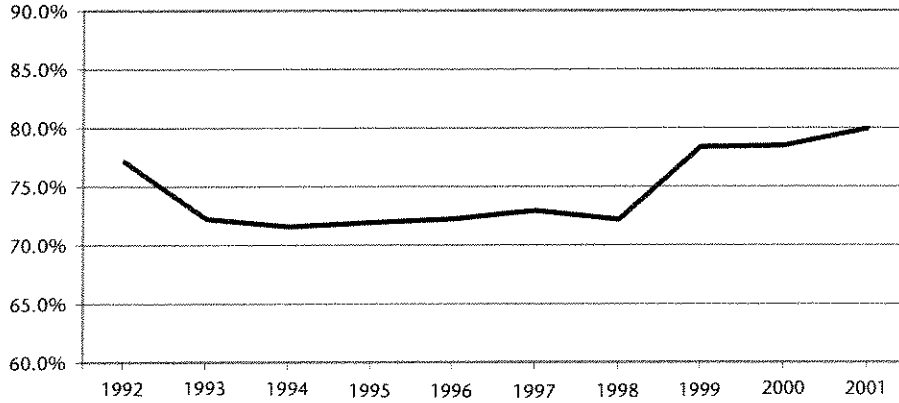
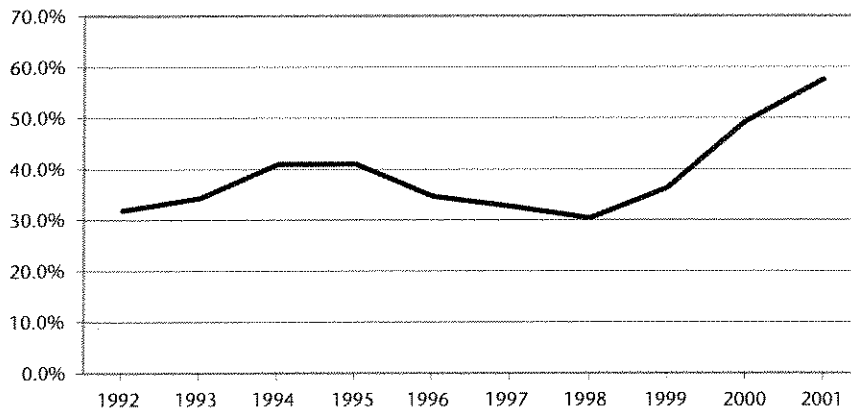


Figure 7

Percentage of Wisconsin State Highway Miles with Good or Excellent Pavement Condition



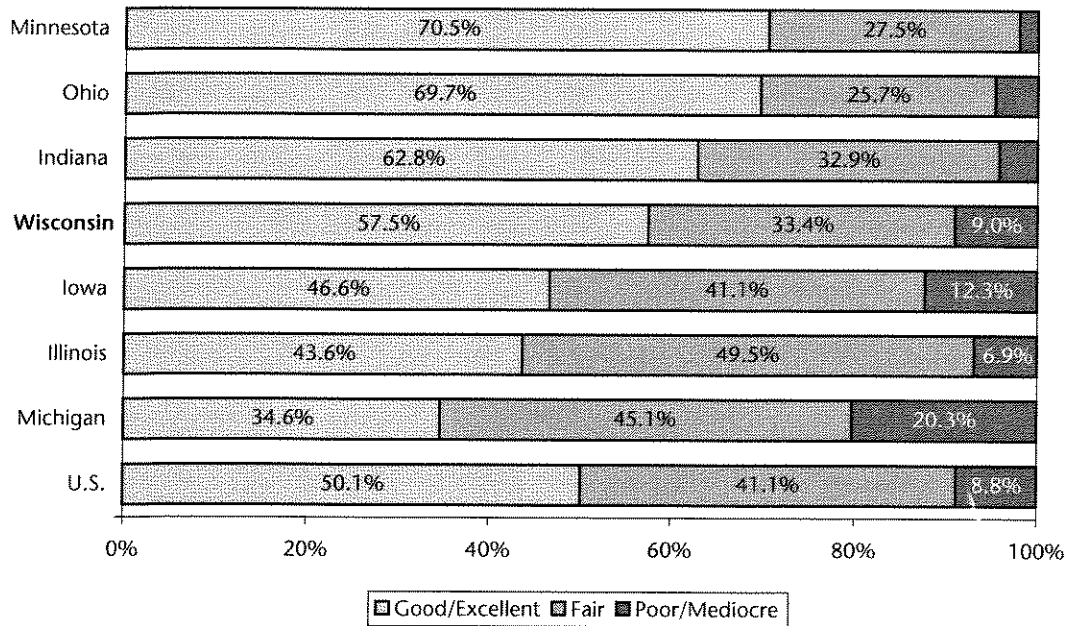
***In 2001, the pavement condition of 9.0 percent of state highway miles was rated poor or mediocre.***

Figure 8 compares pavement conditions in midwestern states based on a machine-measured roughness rating known as the pavement serviceability index. In 2001, Wisconsin was fourth among seven midwestern states in the percentage of state highway miles in good or excellent condition. The national average was 50.1 percent. Based

on our analysis of these roughness ratings, only 9.0 percent of Wisconsin's state highway miles were in poor or mediocre condition at that time, compared to a low of 2.0 percent in Minnesota and a high of 20.3 percent in Michigan.

Figure 8

Percentage of State Highway Miles by Roughness Rating  
2001



State Highway Plan 2020

Wisconsin's long-range highway plan, which is required by the federal government and is DOT's principal tool for establishing highway program funding needs, is DOT's State Highway Plan 2020. In February 2000, when DOT adopted this plan, it estimated that fully implementing the plan's recommendations would require \$20.4 billion from FY 1999-2000 through FY 2019-20, but that only \$15.2 billion in funding would be available. The difference between these estimates is \$5.2 billion.

In developing the State Highway Plan 2020, DOT considered several spending scenarios, which are shown in Table 27. Its initial scenario assumed that amounts budgeted in FY 1998-99, with increases for inflation, would be spent each year from FY 1999-2000 through

FY 2019-20; this spending would total \$15.2 billion (in 1999 dollars) over the 21-year period. The first alternative focused on preserving the existing system, the second focused on completing projects on only some state highways, and the third focused on expanding the entire state highway system. A fourth alternative was ultimately selected by DOT and serves as the basis of the current state highway program and DOT's transportation funding requests. The selected alternative blends alternatives two and three and has a projected cost of \$20.4 billion (in 1999 dollars).

Table 27

**Comparison of Various Spending Scenarios for State Highway Programs**  
FY 1999-2000 through FY 2019-20  
(constant 1999 dollars, in billions)

Program	Initial Scenario	Alternatives in the State Highway Plan 2020			
		#1	#2	#3	Selected Alternative
Rehabilitation	\$ 9.7	\$12.0	\$10.9	\$13.9	\$10.3
Major Highway	4.0	1.7	7.0	8.4	5.1
Southeast Wisconsin Freeways	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$15.2</b>	<b>\$15.2</b>	<b>\$19.4</b>	<b>\$23.8</b>	<b>\$20.4</b>

The State Highway Plan 2020 does not enumerate specific highway projects. Instead, it establishes various performance targets to address, for example, traffic congestion and pavement condition. If targets are exceeded, a highway becomes eligible for expansion or rehabilitation under the plan. Some of the plan's analyses are quite complex. For example, computer models are used to forecast the future condition of highway segments by analyzing current and projected traffic volume, the amount of truck traffic, and other factors. However, it should be noted that while traffic congestion and pavement condition can be measured objectively, national or other performance standards in these areas do not exist. To assess traffic congestion, pavement condition, and safety deficiencies, and to establish performance targets for the State Highway Plan 2020, DOT relied on several committees made up of its own staff and federal and local transportation and planning officials, and it solicited public feedback.



***The State Highway Plan 2020 would significantly improve the condition of state highways but would require additional funding.***

Table 28 shows DOT’s assessment of deficiencies in the state highway system according to three performance standards established by DOT. As shown in the table, DOT projects that if its selected alternative were implemented, the percentage of the state highway system that is congested would decline from DOT’s estimate of 8 percent in FY 1999-2000 to 4 percent in FY 2019-20, and the percentage with a pavement condition deficiency would decline from its estimate of 30 percent to 6 percent. We note that in some cases, DOT’s deficiency conditions contained in the State Highway Plan 2020 differ from our rankings because of methodological differences.

Table 28

**State Highway System Deficiency Projections in State Highway Plan 2020**

Performance Measure	Deficient Conditions in FY 1999-2000	Projected Deficient Conditions in FY 2019-20			
		Alternative #1	Alternative #2	Alternative #3	Selected Alternative
Traffic Congestion	8%	15%	9%	5%	4%
Pavement Condition	30	15	14	6	6
Safety	40	35	32	3	31

Although DOT’s State Highway Plan 2020 is comprehensive and takes into account state and local opinion regarding future transportation needs, we are concerned that:

- the performance targets are progressively higher under the proposed alternatives, and highest under the selected alternative;
- the types of projects proposed to address deficiencies are also progressively more expensive and extensive; and
- the fiscal and other effects of the southeast Wisconsin freeway system have not been consistently addressed.

***DOT has discretion in defining project scope and expanding projects as requested by local officials.***

Specifically, the selected alternative separately identified all costs associated with reconstructing the southeast Wisconsin freeway system, while the other alternatives did not. Furthermore, while the performance measures set forth in the plan are useful in identifying future highway program needs, the discretion DOT currently exercises in project selection, location, and design greatly affects project costs. This discretion is particularly evident in the major highway program. For example, most of the cost increases we documented in Table 9 occurred because the scope of projects expanded beyond what had originally been proposed. Although in many cases the expansion was not initiated by DOT, but was instead requested by local officials, DOT's responsiveness to these requests, along with its reluctance to accept a number of cost-saving value engineering recommendations, increases the State's funding commitments to existing projects and limits the number of new projects that can be undertaken.

DOT is also developing a new policy on freeway construction. In *Corridors 2020*, a report released in 1988, DOT indicated that most of the 1,550 miles of highways that link Wisconsin's major population and economic regions would be built as four-lane expressways, rather than freeways, in order to use available funding more cost effectively. At that time, DOT reported that this backbone system would be upgraded to freeway standards as traffic needs warranted.

***DOT is developing a new policy on freeway construction.***

However, in November 2001, DOT drafted new guidelines that place greater emphasis on building freeways. While these guidelines are not yet official policy, some DOT staff told us that they use them to make design decisions, and DOT has indicated that the informal guidelines will likely be confirmed in a new policy it is developing. The precise cost of upgrading 1,550 miles of backbone highways to freeway standards has not yet been determined, but based on a sample of six projects completed since 2001 that DOT identified for us, the cost per mile for new freeway construction is \$11.3 million, compared to \$5.5 million for new expressway construction. While upgrading highways from expressway to freeway standards is expected to increase safety as well as to improve traffic flow, both costs and needs should be carefully considered, especially given the State's current financial condition.

Similar consideration should be given to the construction of interchanges. Currently, DOT project managers select an interchange's configuration based on factors that include current and expected traffic levels, topography, and public input. Some interchanges require vehicles to stop before driving onto the intersecting road; more expensive interchanges allow traffic to flow more freely.

***DOT project managers have considerable discretion in selecting interchange designs.***

DOT does not typically track interchange construction costs separately; instead, these costs are usually included in a project's total costs. However, based on a sample of nine projects completed since 2001 that DOT identified for us, the average cost to construct an interchange requiring vehicles to stop was \$8.0 million, while the average cost to construct a high-speed interchange was \$24.6 million. As shown in Table 29, land requirements increase with allowable vehicle speed on interchange ramps, so high-speed interchanges have higher real estate costs.

Table 29

**Land Needs for Various Interchange Ramp Speeds**

Allowable Vehicle Speed	Approximate Acres of Land Needed	Approximate Length (in feet) of Each Ramp
30	5	900
40	20	1,600
50	50	2,600
60	130	4,200
70	300	6,400

**Funding Needs**

The State's investments to date have resulted in a highway system that compares favorably in various rankings with those of other midwestern states and is generally in good condition. However, DOT, the Transportation Projects Commission, and the Legislature face many short- and long-term challenges as they seek to maintain existing highways and expand the system to meet safety, economic development, and other needs. These challenges include:

- a \$5.2 billion funding shortfall identified in DOT's State Highway Plan 2020;
- reconstruction of the aging southeast Wisconsin freeway system, which is not yet fully funded;

- increasing reliance on bonding that, for the first time, requires the issuance of bonds for a part of the state highway rehabilitation program and reconstruction of the southeast Wisconsin freeway system;
- commitments to complete 32 major highway projects that are already enumerated; and
- the needs of the other transportation programs that DOT manages.

To address these challenges and better assess the state highway program's needs, the Transportation Projects Commission, the Legislature, and other policy-makers will need more accurate and comprehensive information from DOT.

**☑ Recommendation**

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*We recommend the Department of Transportation:*

- *follow our recommendations to improve financial and project reporting, in order to facilitate cost analyses;*
- *provide comprehensive and consistently prepared information in its planning documents, particularly those that identify and estimate the costs of major highway projects; and*
- *consistently communicate changes in project design and scope, so that all understand when projects or funding needs expand beyond initial proposals.*

■ ■ ■ ■

## Appendix 1

# Statutorily Required Approval Process for Major Highway Projects

Requirements	
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### Even-numbered years

Before March 15

DOT recommends a list of projects for which environmental studies could be completed.

Before April 15

Since 1999, the Transportation Projects Commission approves environmental studies for selected projects. The following projects are currently being studied:

- State Trunk Highway (STH) 38 (Racine and Milwaukee counties)
- United States Highway (USH) 12 (Fort Atkinson Bypass)
- USH 8 (Polk and Barron counties)
- USH 10/STH 441 (Winnebago County)
- USH 14/STH 11 (Janesville to Interstate 43)
- Interstate 39/90 (Illinois to USH 12)
- USH 45/STH 15 (Outagamie County)
- USH 51 (Stoughton to McFarland)

Studies for potential projects on STH 38 and USH 12 were approved by DOT before 1999, while studies for the six other potential projects were approved by the Commission in 2000 or 2002.

After this process is complete, projects may be considered for enumeration.

### Odd-numbered years

Before October 15

Based on initial planning efforts, DOT reports to the Transportation Projects Commission a list of projects for which draft environmental studies have been completed. These projects are candidates for enumeration.

October 15 through  
December 31

The Transportation Projects Commission may hold public hearings on candidate projects.

### Even-numbered years

January 1 to March 15

The Transportation Projects Commission may hold public hearings on candidate projects.

Before September 15

DOT evaluates, ranks, and recommends potential projects for enumeration to the Transportation Projects Commission.

Before December 15

The Transportation Projects Commission recommends selected projects for enumeration to the Legislature.

### Odd-numbered years

Projects are enumerated by the Legislature and the Governor in the Biennial Budget.

## Appendix 2

### **Time Line for the State Trunk Highway 57 (Green Bay to Dyckesville) Major Highway Project**

- 1988 Based on traffic congestion concerns, staff in DOT's Green Bay district office complete an initial planning document to expand STH 57 from two to four lanes from STH 54 in Green Bay through Dyckesville.
- 1989 The Corridors 2020 Plan identifies the expansion of STH 57 as a potential major highway project.
- 1990 DOT presents the project to the Transportation Projects Commission for consideration but does not recommend it for enumeration.  
  
The Commission subsequently recommends the project for enumeration after it is informed that the Legislature intends to increase the major highway program's budget. The project's anticipated cost is \$34.0 million.
- 1991 The Legislature enumerates the project in 1991 Wisconsin Act 39, the 1991-93 Biennial Budget Act.
- 1995 DOT completes an initial planning document for constructing a diamond interchange at the junction of STH 57 and STH 54, in place of the existing at-grade intersection.
- 1996 DOT completes a draft environmental impact statement for the entire STH 57 corridor and a preliminary design for the STH 57/STH 54 interchange.
- 1998 DOT completes the final environmental impact statement for the STH 57 corridor.
- 1999 Construction of the project begins.
- 2001 DOT completes preliminary designs for expanding STH 57 from north of the STH 57/STH 54 interchange to a point south of Dyckesville, while a bypass of Dyckesville is added to a separate major highway project.  
  
Removing the Dyckesville bypass, including an interchange and overpass, from the project makes it difficult to compare the original cost estimate to the final project cost.
- 2003 Construction of the project is scheduled for completion. The project is expected to cost \$27.4 million. However, this amount excludes the cost of the Dyckesville bypass, which cannot be determined because its costs are combined with those of a separate project.



## Wisconsin Department of Transportation

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November 17, 2003

Ms. Janice Mueller  
State Auditor  
Legislative Audit Bureau  
22 East Mifflin Street Suite 500  
Madison, Wisconsin 53703

Dear Ms. Mueller:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your recent evaluation of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's Major Highway Program. The Department appreciates the thoroughness of the review and the professionalism of your staff during the conduct of the audit.

The report highlights a number of opportunities for the Department to improve its management of the major highway program. Given the importance of a safe and efficient transportation network to the state's economy, the concerns raised over the cost of highway projects deserve serious consideration. In addition, it is important now, more than ever, to ensure that the Department constructs highway projects as cost-effectively as possible as the challenge of funding the reconstruction of the Marquette Interchange and other major highway improvements moves forward.

The report makes a number of specific recommendations:

### Real Estate Costs

The report notes that the real estate expenditures of the Department for the major highway program has increased from \$11.8 million in FY 1993-94 to \$43.8 million in FY 2002-03 in large part because of the purchase of land in or near urban areas of the state.

***LAB RECOMMENDATION:*** *DOT should track the number of acres and the cost of all real estate it purchases for each major highway project.*

***Department Response:*** The Department will study the cost and timing of potential changes to its processes and computer systems to allow for the identification of costs associated with the purchase of real estate for highway projects. However, the trend of increasing real estate costs is likely to continue given current funding levels and the current 12-year time lag between the

enumeration and construction of a highway project. The Department will provide an update to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee by June 1, 2004.

#### Project Cost Increases

The report notes that project costs can increase significantly between the time when a project is enumerated in the statutes and when actual construction work begins. The Department recognizes the importance in developing reasonably accurate initial cost estimates and has taken steps to provide more accurate estimates to the Transportation Projects Commission. The report acknowledges three efforts by the Department to improve the financial management of the major highway program. First of all, the Department has begun an effort to complete more design work on a project before bringing the project to the Transportation Projects Commission. This additional design work allows for an improved estimate of the cost to be prepared. In addition, the Department has created a departmental Projects Review Committee to review project designs and assess the need for various features and changes. Finally, the Department hired an engineering firm to recommend project modifications which would reduce the cost of the project but still adequately serve the traveling public.

*LAB RECOMMENDATION: DOT should report to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee by February 2, 2004, on the amount of savings it expects to achieve as a result of the November 2002 value engineering study, as well as the reasons why it does not plan to implement the study's other recommendations.*

**Department Response:** The Department will prepare a report for the Joint Legislative Audit Committee by February 2, 2004, regarding its implementation of the recommendations within the value engineering study.

#### Improved Reporting

The report identifies concerns with the ability of the Department to produce financial reports which allow for the analysis of expenditures on individual highway projects.

*LAB RECOMMENDATION: DOT should create a report to include all expenditures associated with each major highway project and provide it to the TPC semiannually.*

**Department Response:** The Department will study the cost and timing of potential changes to its processes and computer systems to allow for the identification of costs associated with individual highway projects. In addition, the Department will work toward providing a report to the members of the Transportation Projects Commission to enhance their understanding of the Major



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Highway Program's financial status and the feasibility of enumerating additional projects. The Department will provide an update to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee by June 1, 2004.

#### Environmental Expenditures

The report identifies concerns with the ability of the Department to produce financial reports which allow for the analysis of environmental related expenditures on individual highway projects.

***LAB RECOMMENDATION:** DOT should track its overall and per project environmental expenditures, including those incurred by its own staff, consultants, and construction contractors, and reports its plan for doing so to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee by June 1, 2004.*

***Department Response:** The Department will identify needed process and computer system changes to allow for the identification of environmental costs associated with individual highway projects. However, in order to fully analyze the cost of complying with environmental laws and regulation, the cooperation of the road-building industry will be required. Due to the competitive nature of the industry, members of the industry may be hesitant to share cost data with the Department. The Department will ask the Department of Natural Resources and the road-construction industry to participate in a discussion of the cost of complying with environmental laws and regulations. The Department will provide an update to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee by June 1, 2004.*

#### Project Alternatives

The report identifies concerns with the cost information included by the Department in the Environmental Impact Statements prepared for major highway projects.

***LAB RECOMMENDATION:** DOT should develop policies specifying that all project costs should be included in the project cost estimates that are presented in the environmental documents it prepares.*

***Department Response:** The Department will review and update the policies, which guide the development of cost estimates to be included in the required environmental documents prepared for a proposed highway project. The Department expects to develop guidelines by January 1, 2005.*


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The Department acknowledges the importance of providing consistent and comprehensive estimates of the cost of current and prospective major highway projects to the Governor and Legislature. Achieving a balance between providing the most cost-effective solution and accommodating the desires and concerns of citizens affected by highway projects provides a constant challenge to the Department and its staff. The Department recognizes the need to be able to provide additional information when changes are made to the initial concept or design of a project.

While the report focused on the management of the Major Highway Program, the report also demonstrates the need for additional funding for the maintenance and operation of the existing State Trunk Highway system. For example, table 3 of the report shows that funding for major highway projects increased 54% between FY 1994 and FY 2003 and funding for rehabilitation work increased 55% over the same time period. On the other hand, funding for maintenance and traffic operations increased only 34% over the same time frame. While expanding the highway system provides many benefits to the state's economy, the investment in the existing highway system must also be maintained through regular maintenance activities such as snow plowing and crack filling.

The audit provides an excellent starting point for the discussion and debate in the next biennium over the appropriate funding levels for expanding, rehabilitating and maintaining our highway system.

Sincerely,



Frank J. Busalacchi  
Secretary