

For Michigan Roads, MDOT Needs to “Fix It First”



TR Transportation
Riders United

Information

Transportation Riders United is a Detroit-based nonprofit organization with over 25 years of transit advocacy experience. TRU believes everyone should be able to get where they need to go, regardless of whether they drive. TRU educates, advocates, and mobilizes for more and better public transit and other affordable, sustainable mobility options throughout the Detroit region.

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Introduction

After a century of building and widening an enormous network of roads, it's time for Michigan to take a different approach to our transportation infrastructure. Our state's population size has barely changed for decades. Our existing roads are in disrepair. Yet the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) continues to pour millions into unnecessary highway and road widenings which have been proven not to reduce congestion over the long term. The focus on pavement condition has not yielded a more efficient system that gets people where they need to go in a timely manner.¹

Michigan can better address transportation needs by investing in a range of mobility options beyond roads, including transit, trains, and safe walking and biking infrastructure. This would minimize traffic pressure while increasing access for people who don't drive, decreasing traffic crashes, and decreasing pollution.

It's time to reorient MDOT's priorities around a "Fix It First" policy focused on maintaining what we have.

¹ Citizens Research Council of Michigan 2025.



The State of Our Roads

Neither MDOT Nor Municipalities Can Afford to Maintain Their Existing Roads...

It's no secret that many of Michigan's roads are in severe disrepair. Public and private road experts report that without additional funding, they're going to get worse.

- According to Michigan's 2023 Roads & Bridges Annual Report, 33% of major roads are in poor condition, as are 47% of local roads.²
- By some estimates, to maintain the current road system, Michigan would need to invest an additional \$3.9 billion per year.³
- The cost of paving one lane-mile of highway is up nearly 40% since 2019.⁴
- The state has steadily increased the amount it pours into roads and bridges — jumping from \$2.6 billion in 2004 to \$6.1 billion in 2024 — with little to show for it.⁵
- Governor Whitmer's Rebuilding Michigan Bond Program funds will be fully spent by the end of 2025, and debt service for those bonds will continue to strain the transportation budget in the coming years.⁶

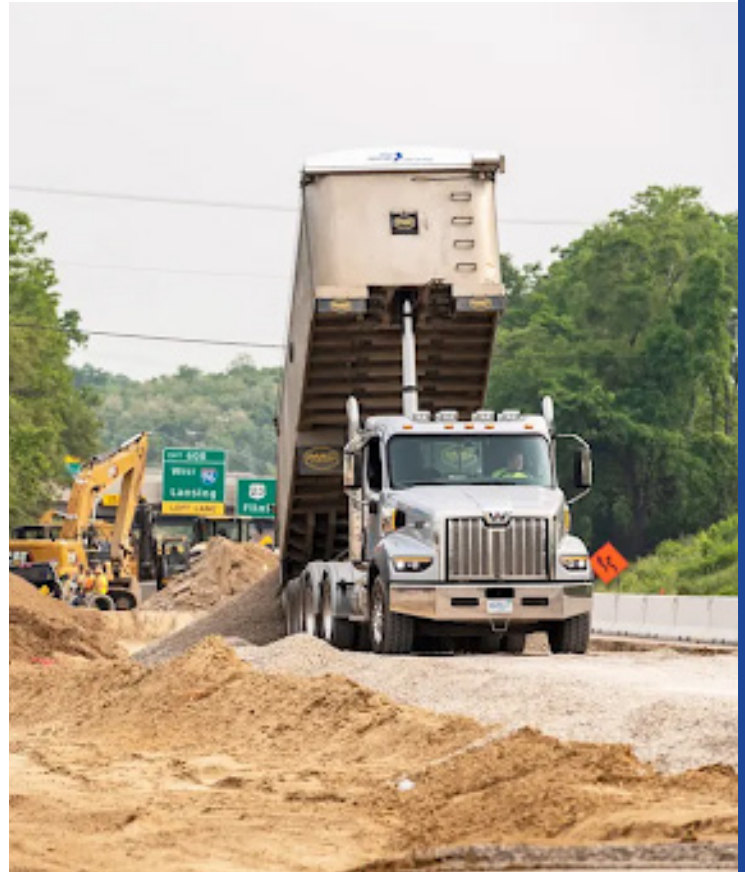
2 Michigan Transportation Asset Management Council 2023.

3 Hofman 2023.

4 Schuster 2025.

5 Hermani 2025.

6 Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) 2024.

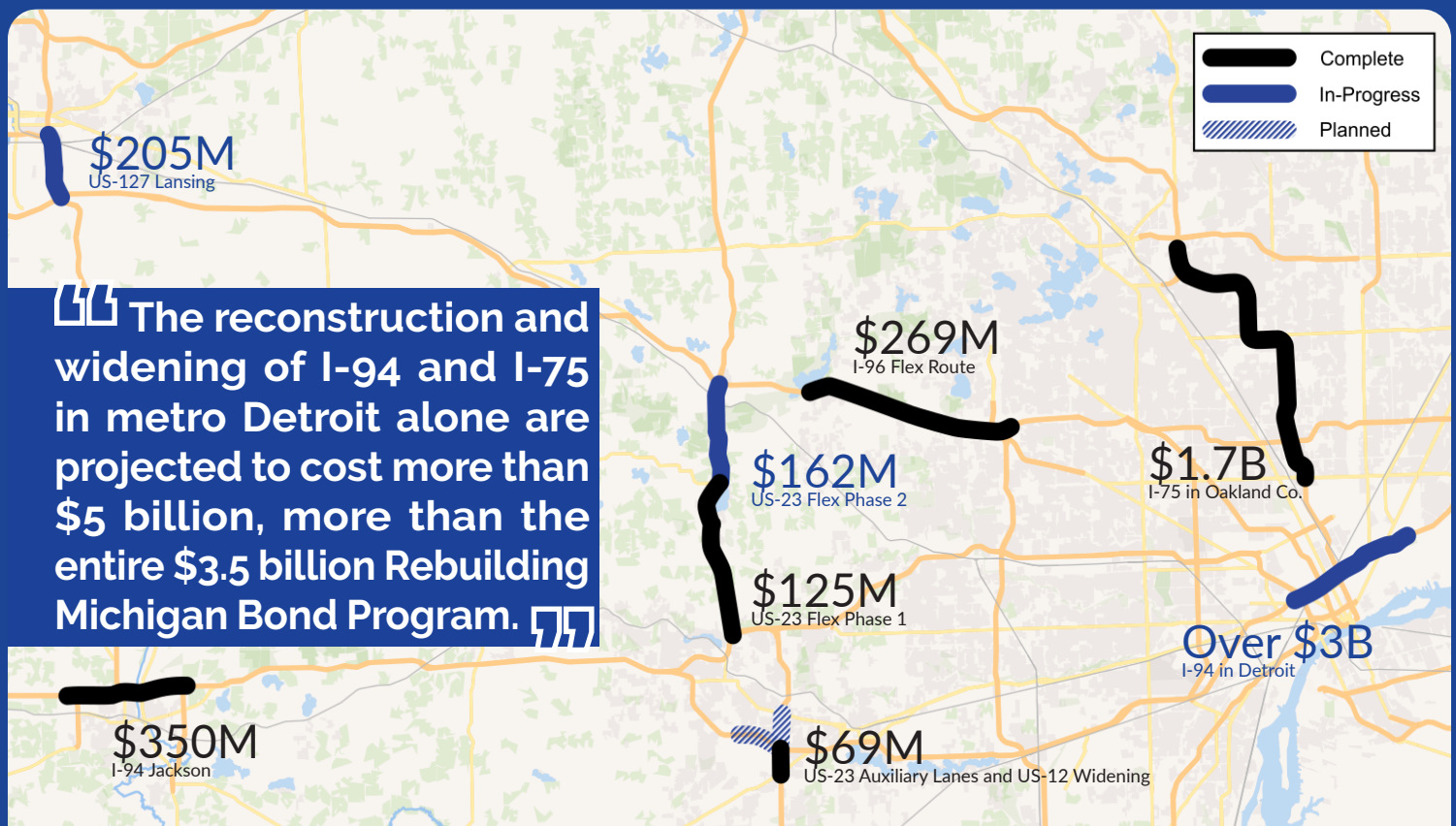


...Yet MDOT's Still Building More

Despite the state of our existing roads, MDOT is still pouring billions of dollars into massive highway-widening projects around the state. These projects include:

- Adding an additional travel lane in each direction to 18 miles of I-75 in Oakland County
- Widening 16 miles of US-23 with "flex lanes" in Washtenaw and Livingston County
- Widening 12 miles of I-96 with "flex lanes" in Oakland County
- Widening 7 miles of I-94 in Detroit and 13 miles in Jackson

The reconstruction and widening of I-94 and I-75 in metro Detroit alone are projected to cost more than \$5 billion, more than the entire \$3.5 billion Rebuilding Michigan Bond Program.



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Fig 1. Major recent or ongoing MDOT highway widenings in the metro Detroit region. Costs depicted are total project costs including rehabilitation or reconstruction of existing infrastructure. See sources at back of Bibliography

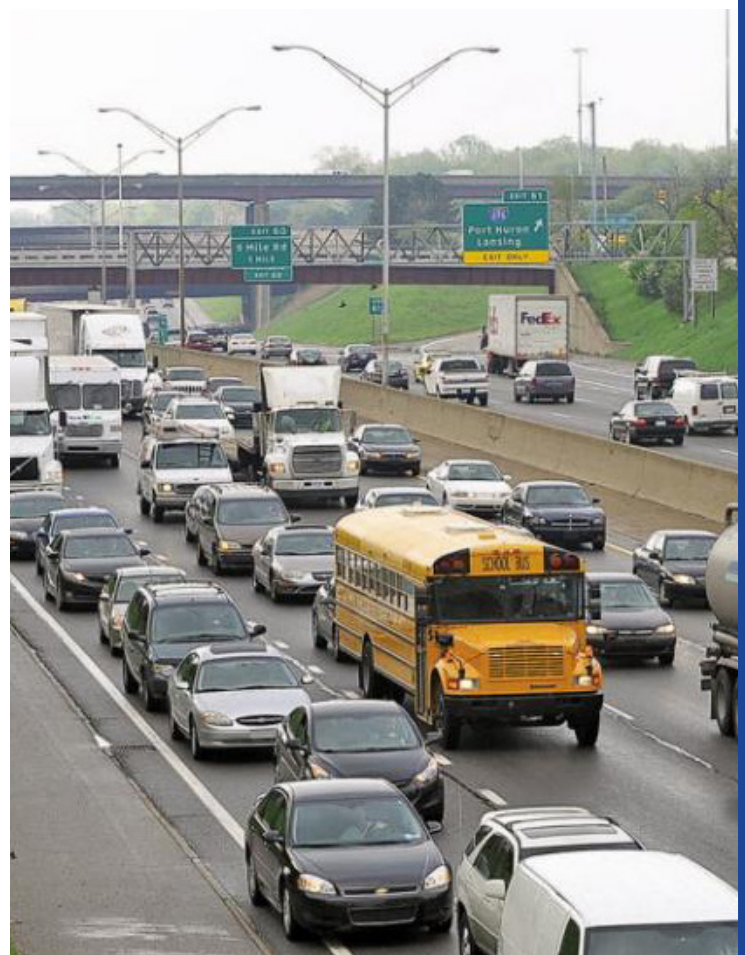
Highway Widening Doesn't Reduce Congestion

If highway widening really reduced congestion, traffic jams would be a thing of the past. But they're not, despite the billions of dollars MDOT has spent on widenings over the years.

That's because of the phenomenon called "induced demand." In brief, widening a highway draws more traffic onto it. Over time, widenings also change development patterns, contributing to further urban sprawl, which in turn creates more traffic.

From 1993-2017, Detroit added 15% more freeway lane-miles, yet congestion grew by 45%, despite a 5% drop in metropolitan population.⁷

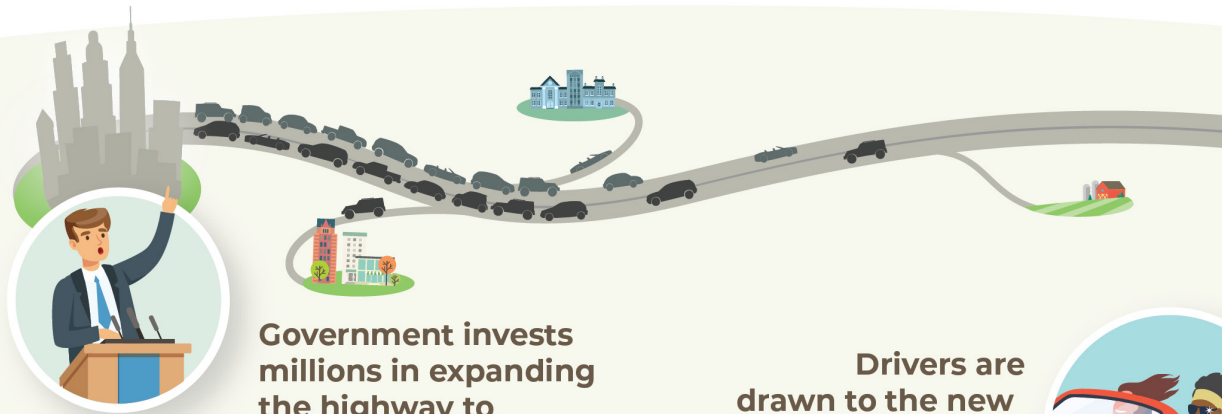
Michigan needs a fix-it-first commitment to not widen roads or highways until it has a fiscally constrained plan to reach pavement quality, safety, and other key metrics of quality.



⁷ Transportation for America 2020.
Image on Next Page: Transportation for America 2023.

Induced demand

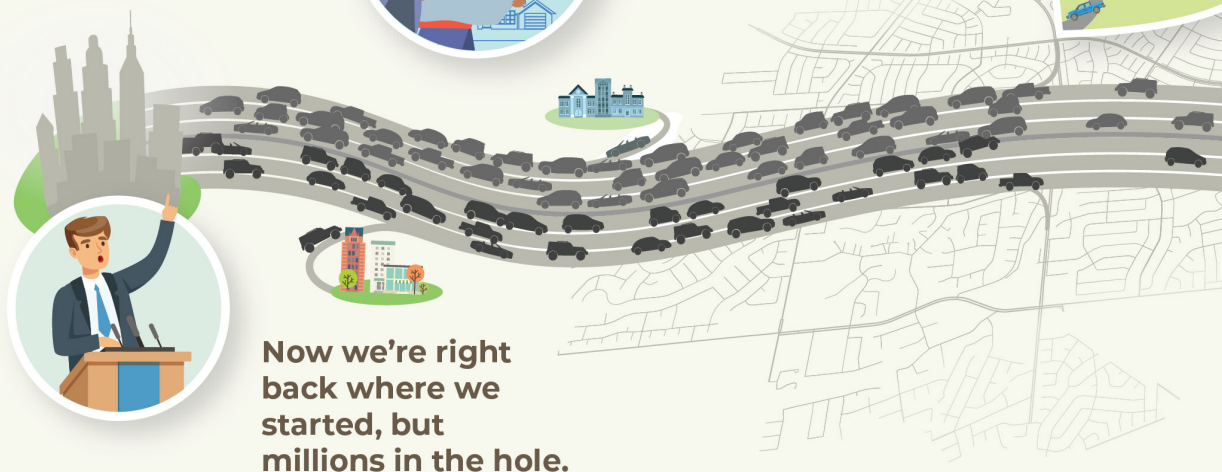
How highway expansion actually creates more traffic



Drivers are drawn to the new open road, even adding new trips where they previously avoided them.



Development follows, prompting more (and longer) car trips.



Fix-It-First

A Fix-It-First Policy Also Reduces Sprawl, Pollution, and the Need to Drive So Far

A Fix-It-First policy also has ancillary benefits, besides saving money.

- It creates more construction jobs. According to a 2009 study, road repair projects create 16% more jobs than new road construction per dollar spent.⁸
- It reduces urban sprawl. From 1985 to 2015, metro Detroit's population remained stable, but its urbanized land area increased by 130 square miles, roughly the same area as the entire city of Detroit. This sprawl results in a lot more infrastructure costs put onto the same number of people.⁹
- It reduces the need for us to drive farther to meet our needs. Due to urban sprawl, from 1980-2020, while Michigan's population increased only 9%, our annual vehicle miles traveled (VMT) grew 65%. More VMT means more wear and tear on roads and higher transportation costs for families.¹⁰
- It reduces climate change and air pollution. The transportation sector is currently surpassing the energy sector as the largest source of greenhouse gas pollution in Michigan.¹¹ Locally, as well as nationally, increases in driving are cancelling out a more efficient vehicle fleet.¹²

A Fix-it-First Policy Could Work for Michigan

A Fix-It-First policy could take a number of forms in Michigan. Indeed, in 2003, in response to public pressure, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm deferred four major MDOT capacity expansion projects, including the proposed extension of I-375 to the Detroit riverfront. (That project was ultimately cancelled, and MDOT is now proposing to remove I-375 altogether.) "We must focus on fixing the roads we have today before we look forward to expanding tomorrow," Granholm stated.¹³

In addition to executive action on specific projects, there are a number of policies that could be adopted to encourage a "fix-it-first" policy for the long term. One possibility would be for MDOT to implement a moratorium on new capacity projects until MDOT's highway and bridge condition targets have been met. Additionally, provisions of the 2020 federal INVEST transportation bill could be applied at the state level. These provisions would have required state Departments of Transportation to:

- Require a maintenance plan for building new capacity
- Require benefit-cost analyses (BCAs) on new capacity projects
- Include a range of new performance measures in BCAs.¹⁴

Recently adopted policies in other states also provide potential models for Michigan to follow. While not synonymous with a "fix-it-first" policy, if properly implemented they promise to de-prioritize capacity expansion. Some of these policies have been adopted through legislation, and some through regulatory measures.

8 Fortunati 2021.

9 Michigan News 2020.

10 US Census Bureau (2021); United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) (1980); United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) 2020.

11 Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) 2022.

12 Smart Growth America and Transportation for America 2020.

13 Former Governors of Michigan 2003.

14 Weier 2024.

Examples in Other States

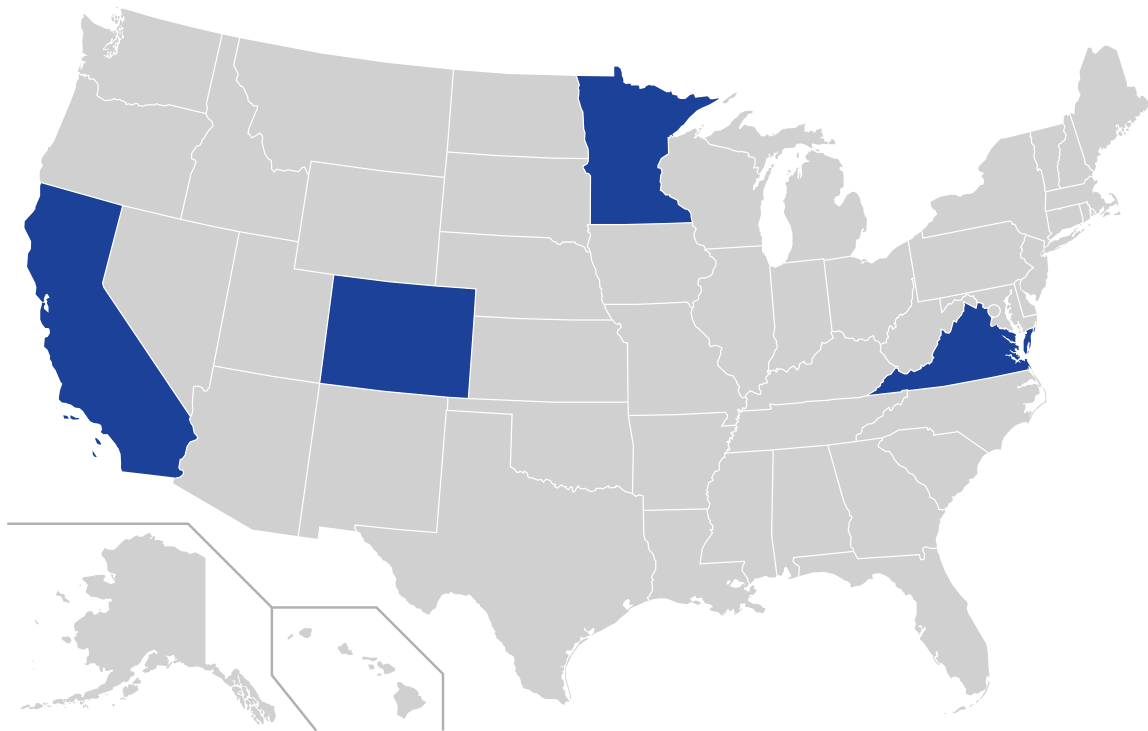
Minnesota, Colorado and California

Minnesota, Colorado and California have all established policies (through regulation and legislation) that aim to reduce vehicle miles travelled (VMT) in order to reduce greenhouse gas pollution. They require mitigation actions to be implemented for any transportation projects (like capacity expansions) that are anticipated to significantly increase VMT. California and Minnesota also have specific policy targets for VMT reduction.¹⁵ Michigan's Healthy Climate Plan sets a goal of carbon neutrality by 2050, but does not mention VMT.¹⁶

California legislation also mandated a set of "state of good repair" targets for road maintenance.¹⁷

Virginia

A 2014 Virginia law required the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to establish a statewide prioritization process for transportation projects. The process, called SMARTSCALE, ensures that "transportation projects are scored based on an objective, outcome-based process that is transparent to the public and allows decision-makers to be held accountable to taxpayers." Virginia's Commonwealth Transportation Board then decides which transportation projects to fund based on SMARTSCALE. Performance measures include not only traditional metrics such as congestion reduction, but also how projects contribute to efficient land use and improved air quality.¹⁸ The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) has no equivalent method for scoring and selecting transportation projects for funding.¹⁹



¹⁵ Levandowski 2024; Fromer 2022; Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) 2017; Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) 2023.

¹⁶ Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) 2022.

¹⁷ California Transportation Commission 2016.

¹⁸ Virginia Secretary of Transportation 2025.

¹⁹ Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) 2025.

Alternatives to Highway Capacity Expansion

To better meet Michigan's transportation needs - including for the roughly one-third of Michiganders who can't drive or don't have access to a car - MDOT and other road agencies need to consider alternatives to capacity expansion, such as:

- Investing in public transit. Michigan invests far less in public transit than many other states. Transit reduces congestion, improves air quality, and provides more affordable transportation for working families.
- Improving bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, like sidewalks and bike lanes. Many car trips are only a mile or two in length - a reasonable distance for walking and bicycling, if the necessary infrastructure is provided.
- Allowing more housing near employment centers. Many people are forced to drive long distances because they can't afford housing near their workplaces. Permitting more housing, including more affordable housing, near job centers can reduce the need to drive.

As Michigan faces crumbling roads and skyrocketing costs, it's past time for the state to rethink our approach to highway planning and construction. We can no longer afford to continue adding highway capacity we don't even need, capacity which actually exacerbates the congestion it's supposed to solve.

Policies adopted in other states point the way towards a more responsible approach to transportation spending. Moving towards a fix-it-first model, and a transparent project selection process that accounts for all impacts of the transportation system, will help us to build a more livable, sustainable and prosperous state. We urge MDOT, Governor Whitmer, and state legislators to implement these policies, whether by administrative or legislative means.



“The vast majority of vehicles on Michigan's roads will still be burning gasoline in 2030, even if we adopt the market incentives recommended in this Plan and automakers aggressively pursue their electric vehicle sales goals. In light of this reality, Michigan needs to employ multiple strategies to achieve our transportation decarbonization goals as the transition to electrification unfolds over time.”

-Michigan Healthy Climate Plan

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