

EP budget rough on roads

Revenue shortfall means city can't spend as much as needed on repairs

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[of the Journal Star](#) Posted Mar 28, 2010 @ 10:03 PM Last update Mar 29, 2010 @ 09:37 AM

EAST PEORIA —

Take a drive down Baker Street off Highview Road to the end of the cul-de-sac and it's hard to avoid the tire-gouging cracks and potholes blanketing the road.

It's just one of many streets in the city needing repair that may not get done this construction season.

"The money just isn't there," said commissioner Gary Densberger of the 2010-2011 budget. "Too many revenue streams are still too down."

The City Council has already allocated \$1 million to next year's street improvement program. Still, more money, much more - at least another \$1.5 million - is needed if the city wants to stay on a schedule of proper road maintenance, said Dan Decker, the council's commissioner of streets and public improvements.

"The roads are in bad shape," Decker said. "I think you're going to continue to see more problems arise as the months go on."

That forecast isn't good for the city, which faces a loss of about \$500,000 from the state if a 30 percent cut to local governments' share of state income tax passes. Such a cut was proposed by Gov. Pat Quinn in his recent budget address.

And that's not counting the money, some \$500,000, still owed to the city by the state for the last four months of missed payments on income tax revenue.

"The streets in question - it's not a wish list type of option - these are true problems that we're going to have to fix," said Decker. "I'm not saying we should drive on streets of gold, but we shouldn't have our vehicles damaged because of the roads we drive on."

The last two years, the city spent a combined \$5 million to repair roads. This year, however, budget constraints may prevent any more money than what's already been committed.

"Based on what I'm seeing in the budget presentations, I don't think there's going to be a lot more money allocated to the street program this year," Densberger said. "I would love to be able to, but the revenue is just not there."

With revenue slumping, what other avenues could the city pursue to access more cash? An idea proposed last spring by Decker to impose a restaurant tax is being discussed actively again.

"It's a way to help us to find the necessary money for our roads and it would allow people from outside our community to help us pay for our roads," said Decker.

Densberger said he would be open to further exploring the idea of a restaurant tax, though he admitted in the end he may not support it. Commissioner Mike Unes is flatly against it.

"I've heard from quite a few business owners and individuals who are very much against the concept of a restaurant tax right now, especially in these uncertain times and with tax increases that seem to be popping up," said Unes. "I think East Peoria has an environment that is business friendly and I would be very concerned to lose our competitive edge with those types of tax increases."

Mayor Dave Mingus said a clearer choice may present itself after the budget has been finalized.

"The budget process isn't over, and even though the roads have not been funded to the full potential as last year, I think there may be other alternatives," he said.

Commissioner Tim Jeffers said he would consider raising sales tax a quarter of a cent as a way to stay on top of road repairs.

"We need to spend \$2 million to \$2.5 million each year to break even" on road maintenance, said Jeffers. "If we're spending any less, then we're falling behind."

The council is set to approve next year's budget by May. In the meantime, Decker is open to suggestions on ways to fund street repairs.

"I don't know what another solution is," said Decker. "I challenge anyone else to come up with a solution that would give us the needed funds to fix our problem."

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