

Road Report

A publication of the Road Commission for Oakland County for public officials serving Oakland County www.rcocweb.org

US DOT helps kick off RCOC's groundbreaking project to deploy lifesaving vehicle technology in Oakland County

Thanks to a U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT) grant, the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) is spearheading a transformative project to deploy and operate advanced vehicle technology in Oakland County. The project, entitled "Leading in Sustainable Safety with Technology," aims to build a model for the deployment of safety-critical communication technology.

Deputy Assistant US Secretary of Transportation and Chief U.S. DOT Scientist Robert Hampshire, PhD, helped kick off the project at a press conference at RCOC's state-of-the-art Traffic Operations Center in Waterford Twp. on Oct. 25.

The project will study the best ways to deploy this technology which enables communication between vehicles, infrastructure and even pedestrians. Vehicles can share safety-critical information with each other, traffic signals and mobile



RCOC Chair Andrea LaLonde, left with Deputy Assistant U.S. Secretary of Transportation Robert Hampshire, kicked off the Oct. 25 press conference to announce the project start. Above center, Hampshire announces the federal grant to fund the project. Above right, RCOC Deputy Managing Director Gary Piotrowicz explains the benefits of the project.

devices, enhancing safety and efficiency on the road.

For example, the technology would allow cars to alert drivers of sudden stops or pedestrians crossing the street ahead,

helping prevent crashes, or enable emergency vehicles to coordinate with traffic signals for faster response times and safe passage through intersections.

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Southeast Michigan's first wetlands-mitigation bank will speed the road-improvement process

The Road Commission for Oakland County in October joined the County Road Association of Michigan (CRA) and the Michigan Wetland Board (MiWB) to unveil the first-ever wetlands-mitigation bank in southeast Michigan for public transportation agencies, paving the way for faster delivery of road improvement projects at a reduced cost.

The state-funded 15-acre Oakwood Mitigation Bank in Oakland County's Brandon Township provides road agencies no-cost "credits" for replacing wetlands lost due to road-improvement projects such as road or shoulder widening for safety. Buying wetlands from a commercial wetland bank can cost up to \$130,000 per acre — which takes money away from the actual road project.

Under state law, wetland disturbances



The new wetlands-mitigation bank in Brandon Township.

caused by road projects must be mitigated with created wetlands to maintain ecological balance throughout the environment. A road agency must mitigate a wetland in its watershed if the project will impact one-third acre or more. If the project

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ROAD COMMISSION
for OAKLAND COUNTY

Memorial walk honors Springfield Township resident, reminds motorists of pedestrian-safety concerns

The Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) joined several other governmental organizations in supporting a Sept. 30 memorial walk in Springfield Township that honored the memory of township resident Margaret Tippen who was killed in 2022 while walking along a road in the township. The walk also helped draw attention to pedestrian-safety concerns.

"The purpose of the memorial walk," explained Springfield Township Supervisor Laura Moreau, "was not to raise funds, but to raise awareness. Our aim was to educate citizens on how to safely share the road. We also hope that some attention to this issue might get motorists to drive more cautiously."

"We strongly support this effort," stated RCOC Managing Director Dennis Kolar. "Safety is our number-one concern, and we will support efforts that raise awareness of pedestrian safety. We don't want to see any more pedestrian deaths on our roads."

Tippen was killed while taking her daily walk along Kier Road in the township. The idea for the walk arose when Tippen's daughter, Erin Hoffman, of Independence Township, contacted Supervisor Moreau to

discuss what could be done as a community to raise awareness for pedestrian safety.

In her initial e-mail to Supervisor Moreau, Hoffman noted that, "The gravel roads in both Independence and Springfield townships are not farmlands with two families every mile. They truly are neighborhoods, where many families walk and bike."

Moreau noted the Springfield Township Board of Trustees agreed with Hoffman. "The Board is greatly concerned about safety on our rural roads," she stated. "In the absence of sidewalks, residents use gravel roads for walking, running, dog walking and bicycling. Many of these roads are narrow and have curves and hills."

Moreau also cited the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) reports that documented changes in motorists' trends during the COVID pandemic, with speeds increasing, leading to more crashes on many roads. Representatives of SEMCOG attended the memorial walk to promote the organization's Walk.Bike.Drive.Safe campaign and to distribute safety lights and informational materials to participants.

Several RCOC representatives also participated in the event. Others support-



Walkers prepare for the start of the Tippen walk.

ing the event included the Springfield Township Fire Department and the Springfield Township Substation of the Oakland County Sheriff's Department.

RCOC Strategic Planning report coming out soon

The Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) Strategic Planning Report, which summarizes the agency's recently completed Strategic Planning meetings with nearly all Oakland County communities, will be published soon. Stay tune for details.

SAFETY — CONT'D FROM FRONT

The technology optimizes traffic flow by allowing vehicles to communicate with traffic-management systems, reducing crashes, congestion and environmental impacts.

"Transportation safety remains a pressing concern in the United States," noted RCOC Deputy Managing Director/County Highway Engineer Gary Piotrowicz, "with nearly 7 million traffic crashes and 43,000 traffic fatalities in 2021, the highest number in over a decade. Safety-critical communication technology on the roads and in vehicles holds the potential to mitigate these tragedies.

"This project represents a landmark step toward enhancing transportation safety and ensuring a brighter future for Oakland County," Piotrowicz added. "We believe in the power of innovation and are committed to leading the way in sustainable safety with this cutting-edge technology."

The adoption of this technology in the U.S. has faced challenges over the last decade but has been gaining momentum over the last year as the U.S. DOT has

committed to supporting it and prompting a call for collaboration between public- and private-sector leaders to accelerate adoption. RCOC, a trailblazer in intelligent transportation and advanced technology, has responded to this call with a forward-thinking vision.

"One of the biggest hurdles to overcome has been figuring out how transportation agencies are going to pay to deploy this technology," explained Erin Milligan, CEO of P3Mobility, the project delivery lead. "This project is going to explore innovative business models and funding sources that allow RCOC to deploy the technology without relying entirely on government funding."

The project is funded by a \$2 million U.S. DOT Stage 1 Planning and Prototyping Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation (SMART) grant. Key project objectives include:

- Develop a comprehensive plan for technical, business, financial, workforce-development and community-engagement aspects for the deployment

of safety-critical communication technology.

- Demonstrate a prototype of a technology framework that seamlessly integrates with existing traffic-management and advanced transportation systems.
- Demonstrate and quantify the safety, mobility and sustainability benefits of safety-critical communication technology.
- Highlight the advantages of safety-critical communication technology for disadvantaged communities that are affected by traffic congestion.
- Establish partnerships and lay the groundwork for future project phases.

"The transportation industry needs to understand how to blend traditional road engineering with innovative technologies if we ultimately want to address our modern transportation challenges of safety, congestion, emissions and accessibility," stated Sean Kelley, senior vice president of The Mannik & Smith Group Inc., the lead transportation-engineering partner on the project.

The project will run for the next 12 months.

It's that time of year: RCOC winter operations underway

With a couple of snowfalls already under its belt for the year, the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) is in full winter-operations mode: Its truck drivers have completed annual winter-maintenance review training and its mechanics spent much of the fall preparing winter-maintenance equipment, including trucks and plows, in anticipation of the arrival of winter weather.

As part of that process, RCOC is continuing to update its fleet of snowplows/salt trucks. As a safety feature, all new trucks are equipped with green lights that can be seen from a greater distance during winter maintenance.

The agency is prepared for whatever Mother Nature brings during the winter, though a milder winter is always appreciated. "Winter maintenance is one of our most critical functions for the safety of everyone," RCOC Managing Director Dennis Kolar said. "We always prepare for a worse-than-normal winter which includes



An RCOC plow truck equipped with a wing plow.

having plenty of road salt available."

RCOC Chair Andrea LaLonde noted the RCOC team is also constantly looking for best practices when it comes to maintaining roads during the winter months, such as the "wing plows" ordered with new trucks in recent years. "The wing plows extend from the right side of the truck and are retracted when not in use," LaLonde said.

"They increase the width of roadway plowed by a single truck, enabling trucks to

plow a roadway lane and the shoulder at the same time, for example. Equipping many of our trucks with wing plows has improved our efficiency," she noted.

RCOC also has a winter-weather rapid-response plan that includes pickup trucks to get to isolated icing occurrences and other urgent situations more quickly as well as to get into subdivisions and clear crossovers/turnarounds on boulevards more quickly. Additionally, during or following heavy snow events, RCOC uses non-road-maintenance staff to augment its pool of drivers and hires contractors to help in subdivisions and on back gravel roads in some instances.

Despite RCOC's efforts, LaLonde explained that motorists must still be vigilant when driving during or immediately after snow events. "Drive for the conditions. That will make a safer environment for everyone on the road," she explained. She also reminded motorists not to crowd the plow and give the plows "room to groom."

RCOC honors drivers for overtime work during the winter of 2022-23

It's not easy to get up in the middle of the night and come in to work to drive a snowplow, potentially for multiple 16-hour shifts, but that is what RCOC winter maintenance employees do over and over during the winter months.

To show its appreciation for these dedicated employees, each fall, RCOC holds an "overtime breakfast" to thank its many employees who came in between 90 and 100 percent of the time they were asked to work overtime to keep the roads clear during the last winter. This year's overtime breakfast took place on Oct. 27 and honored 49 employees.

"We really appreciate the work these men and women do to keep the roads

safe," Managing Director Dennis Kolar said. "We appreciate what they do and the time they spend away from their families," he added.

Those who worked 100 percent of the overtime requested received RCOC jackets. Those who worked 95 percent to 99 percent received RCOC hoodies, while those who worked



The RCOC snowplow drivers who worked 100 percent of the time they were asked to come in on overtime during the winter of 2022-23.

90 percent to 94 percent received T-shirts.

BANK — CONT'D FROM FRONT
affects any wetland at all, but less than one-third acre, the agency can tap a mitigation site anywhere in Michigan.

"Establishing this mitigation bank in Oakland County is fantastic news for Michigan drivers and local road agencies because it means faster delivery of road projects, lower costs and improved green space," said Denise Donohue, CEO of CRA. "Southeast Michigan has many lakes and wetlands that are

impacted by roadwork. Having a same-watershed mitigation resource avoids time-consuming delays with big price tags. It's gratifying that these state-funded wetland sites facilitate roadwork more quickly. A true win-win-win for roads, wetlands and taxpayers."

The MiWB program uses state transportation funds to purchase, create and preserve wetland sites, which are then maintained by an endowment, usually to a local conservancy group. CRA was instrumental

in advocating for the legislation and budget that created the program.

"The mitigation bank is an immensely important way to balance the need to fix our roads with the responsibility to protect and sustain our environment," said Holly Vickers, MiWB wetland manager. "The new Oakland County bank will serve a huge swath of southeast Michigan, including 13 counties ranging from Calhoun County to the west and St. Clair County to the east, while protecting our environment."

ROAD COMMISSION for OAKLAND COUNTY

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Concern is growing about the impact of EVs on road funding

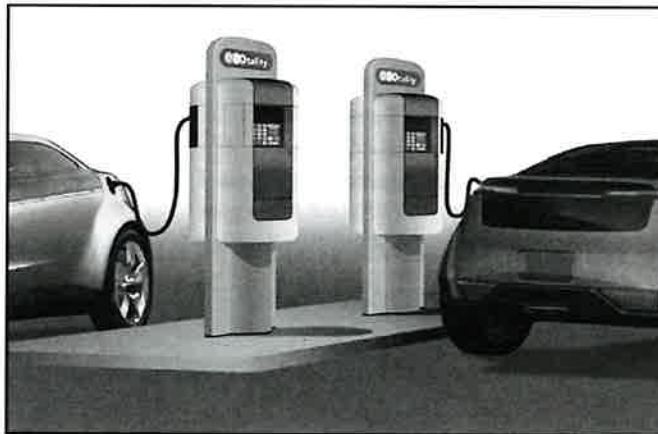
There has been a lot of public discussion of electric vehicles (EVs) recently, including whether or not some auto manufacturers have been overly ambitious in their EV sales goals. From a road agency perspective, however, one thing is clear – EVs are having a negative impact on road funding.

That's because, obviously, they don't use gasoline, meaning their owners are not paying gas tax. Yes, they do pay a slightly higher Michigan vehicle-registration fee, but that does not come close to replacing the revenue they would contribute to the road system if they were paying the gas tax.

In fact, the County Road Association of Michigan (CRA) has calculated that Michigan lost about \$50 million in road funding between 2019 and 2021 due to traditional combustion-engine vehicles being replaced by electric vehicles.

Because the EV fleet has only grown since 2021, the state has likely lost more than another \$50 million in road funding between 2021 and 2023 due to the EVs on the road. That number will certainly continue to grow in coming years as the number of EVs on the roads grows exponentially.

This situation is compounded by the fact that Michigan is already facing a road-funding crisis. While the state Legislature and the governor did raise road funding in 2015 (it was phased in over six years, beginning in 2017), all



objective studies at the time said the state needed a much larger increase than the \$1.2 billion annually in new funding in that package (after the phase-in period).

Additionally, inflation will have eaten away the benefits of that new funding by 2025. As a result, RCOC expects the collective condition of its roads to again begin deteriorating starting in 2025 after having improved each year since the new funding started in 2017.

The additional loss of revenue due to the growing number of EVs on the road will only exacerbate this situation.

The state Legislature and governor's office seem to have begun to acknowledge the EV/road-funding problem, and have agreed to begin studying the issue. However, many in the industry fear that the wheels of state government will turn slowly, and by the time the state identifies a solution, Michigan road funding will have taken a substantial hit.

Anyone who shares this concern is encouraged to convey that sentiment to their state legislators.

Contacting RCOC

If your constituents need information about a road project or want to report a pothole, traffic-signal concern or other road issue, they should call RCOC's **Department of Customer Services** toll free at:

(877) 858-4804

OR

**Fill out a report via the
RCOC Web site:**

www.rcocweb.org

ROAD REPORT

Road Report is published quarterly by the Road Commission for Oakland County. Have a question or comment about Road Report? Call Senior Communications Manager Craig Bryson at (248) 645-2000, ext. 2202.

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