

## Roads won't be repaired until Medicaid is fixed

The Issue | Declining local road conditions.

Our Opinion | State-mandated programs use up nearly all local funds that once went for roads and services.

It's well documented that escalating Medicaid costs and state pension contributions have been sucking the life-blood out of the finances of local governments. As a growing percentage of local money is needed to pay those mandated costs, less and less is left for special projects, maintenance and purchases.

Those "discretionary" items, as they're called, are hardly that to those who have to live with less of them. The declining condition of local roads is a prime example.

Steuben County has had to dramatically cut back on what it spends to fix roads each year as of late. In the late 1990s, Steuben County roads were in better-than-average shape because of the \$3 million to \$4 million that was annually invested in them. Since then, cuts to the county's annual road repair budget - as well as many others - were necessary to keep property tax increases within reason.

With less than \$2 million annually now going into a road repair program that Public Works Commissioner Vincent Spagnoletti says needs \$3.4 million annually to keep pace, the county's road system is deteriorating. The money isn't there to do long-term road reconstruction projects that last 20 years or more. Cheaper, quick-fix methods must now be used to simply keep the roads passable and safe.

The condition is the same in the city of Corning. Lack of funding forced the city a few years ago to abandon its five-year, multi-million dollar street maintenance program that was just beginning to show results after years of neglect.

Last year, no money was available to pave and reconstruct city streets and only \$200,000 was budgeted to patch the really bad spots. Fearing that streets will fall farther into disrepair, the Corning City Council has agreed to borrow \$1 million for paving this year and may have to do the same next year.

Unless a plan is adopted by the state Legislature to curb or cap Medicaid spending, the condition of roads will only get worse. Local services, as a whole, will also suffer. Remember that the next time you drive down a road that resembles a washboard or strike a crater-sized pot hole. Action is needed - and fast - to relieve local governments of mandated programs that diminish discretionary spending for services many consider basic and necessary.