Editorial: Abandoning roads a misguided approach

The hands of local governments shouldn’t be tied up even more.

As the legislature considers ways to fix our state’s crumbling infrastructure, the General Assembly needs to forget any effort to force local governments to maintain additional miles of roads and bridges. Thankfully, lawmakers aren’t rallying around a singular bill that would make such a drastic and ill-advised change.

However, such a plan has been discussed during meetings of the S.C. House Ad Hoc Transportation Committee, a group comprised of state legislators investigating issues with infrastructure.

Those discussions in the General Assembly have misguidedly involved handing the non-federal aided, secondary road system, essentially local “back roads,” to local governments to maintain.

These are the ones that are in the absolute worst condition. Only about 10 percent of those roads are actually designated as being in “good condition,” according to Josh Rhodes, staff attorney for the S.C. Association of Counties, an organization that has opposed devolving roads from the state system to the counties.

That means that 90 percent of those roads are in fair or poor condition. For the legislature to not only give local governments those roads – with really no federal money attached – and also provide no state dollars would be foolish.

This would be no small mandate. This would be a massive, perennial and multi-billion dollar commitment. If lawmakers were to shift this requirement, it would almost undoubtedly mean either increased taxes or a cut in services from local governments. It’s important to note, however, that state lawmakers have actually capped how much local governments can tax.

Some counties have been able to address local infrastructure needs through their own means. Voters in Richland County, for instance, approved a penny-on-the-dollar sales tax in 2012 to pay for road projects. That tax will stay on the books until it generates $1.07 billion or for 22 years, whichever comes first. Other counties, such as Beaufort and York, have passed similar local measures.

However, in other areas of the state, that option remains out of reach or politically unviable. Counties such as Lexington, Greenville and Spartanburg have rejected such measures in recent years. In rural counties, the tax base just doesn’t exist for penny-on-the-dollar plans to be passed. They are simply not going to be able to afford it.

As the legislature looks for the best ways to address infrastructure needs, it’s imperative that they don’t punt these needs over to city and county governments. Doing so would involve abandoning a responsibility rather than showing leadership at the Statehouse.