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Coalition says report bolsters infrastructure needs

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Rep. Frank Garner, R-Kalispell, speaks about infrastructure Thursday at the state Capitol.(Photo: Tribune photo/Phil Drake)

HELENA — Montana would need about $875 million extra in transportation funds annually to make needed repairs and improvements to roads, highways and bridges, according to a study released Thursday by a coalition advocating for the state to have a more aggressive infrastructure plan.

The report by Trip, a nonprofit group that researches surface transportation issues, was released during a news conference at the state Capitol by the Montana Infrastructure Coalition.

"Montana's infrastructure is in sad shape," said Webb Brown, chief executive officer of the Montana Chamber, which helped form the infrastructure coalition.

He called on people "to be more than just supporters – we need to be leaders."

The coalition consists of 80 public and private organizations involved in infrastructure in the state. It has proposed a 10-cent-a-gallon fuel tax to generate nearly $80 million to be used for roads and bridges.

"There's been enough talk, it's time for action," said Darryl James, executive director of the coalition.

The report found that 34 percent of Montana's major urban roads are in poor condition and nearly 20 percent of Montana's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.

Rep. Frank Garner, R-Kalispell, said he will introduce an infrastructure bill during the 2017 session based on recommendations from the coalition. He said Thursday the bill was in the drafting stages.

He said his experience in law enforcement and the military had taught him to focus on the goal.

"It starts with the mission and the mission is the safety of our bridges and roads," he said.

Coalition members are looking for a plan that goes beyond what Gov. Steve Bullock has proposed.

The governor has called for a $292 million infrastructure plan that includes cash and bonds. He is also proposing a long-term solution to funding projects through the creation of the Build Montana Trust, which will direct coal severance tax revenues into a new sub-trust to fund improvements.

He announced Thursday that a $10 million short-term loan would be made to the Montana Department of Transportation, which would lead to nearly $140 million in federal funds for stalled roadway projects to get underway this fiscal year.

James said the governor was "going in the right direction," but that the coalition was looking for a long-term solution.

The Trip report found that 76 percent of major roads in the Electric City's urban area are in poor or mediocre condition. That costs the average motorist an additional $872 each year in extra vehicle operating costs, added repair costs and increased fuel consumption and tire wear, the report claimed.

According to the report, 3 percent of 188 Great Falls-area bridges are structurally deficient and 15 percent are functionally obsolete. Great Falls' drivers lost 11 hours annually due to traffic congestion, which cost them $234, the report stated.

House Minority Leader Jenny Eck, D-Helena, said she was glad to see contractors and lawmakers alike are pushing for needed infrastructure improvements across the state.

However, she said she was looking forward to hearing an infrastructure and jobs bill by Rep. James Keane, D-Butte, on Friday. She said bill includes projects in every county in the state, addressing critical needs and creating thousands of jobs across the state.

Two bills by Keane, HB 11 and 14, are to be heard by the joint appropriations subcommittee on long-range planning

More online

To read the Trip report, go to: http://bit.ly/2jddFW3