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Advocates hope state transportation woes will spur spending

By: Keith M. Phaneuf
The Connecticut Mirror

While transportation advocates offered further evidence Tuesday that Connecticut's aging, congested transportation system is weakening the economy, they remained uncertain whether it would translate into greater state investment in the problem.

A new report from a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group concluded congestion and aging infrastructure cost Connecticut residents in urban areas between \$2,050 and \$2,236 per year.

"We need to make sure this (issue) is front-and-center in our economic development plans," Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff, D-Norwalk, said of the latest report from TRIP, a national transportation research group. "Let's not take our foot off the pedal on this issue."

Duff and the rest of the General Assembly are awaiting a report from Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's administration on how to fund a dramatic overhaul of Connecticut's transportation infrastructure over the next 30 years.

A study panel is expected to give its recommendations to the governor next month. Legislators will return for the regular 2016 legislative session on Feb. 3.

But transportation advocates already are worried that any recommendations will be swamped by growing state budget deficits.

Nonpartisan analysts are projecting a \$254 million general fund deficit this fiscal year, a \$552 million hole in 2016-17, and a \$1.72 billion shortfall in 2017-18 — the first new budget after the next state elections.

Legislators and Malloy agreed this past June to dedicate a portion of state sales tax receipts to increase transportation spending for this fiscal year and the next four.

But that initial ramp-up period largely involves catching up on deferred maintenance.

And there already are fears that funding is insufficient — and won't be preserved.

Despite the sales tax receipts, the Special Transportation Fund within the budget now — according to new projections issued last week — is on pace to run in deficit starting in July 2018.

More importantly, the general fund deficit projected for next fiscal year is more than three times the sales tax receipts pledged to transportation. And in 2017-18, the shortfall is

more than 10 times the size of the designated sales tax revenues.

But Rocky Moretti, policy director for TRIP, said Connecticut faces a high cost if it does nothing with its aging transportation system.

Among the problems Moretti cited are:

- One-third of the major roads and highways statewide, and 72 percent of those in the Hartford area, are in poor condition.
- More than one-third of bridges statewide are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. The latter term means they weren't built to standards sufficient to handle current traffic volume.
- And nearly 1,300 people were killed in crashes in Connecticut in 2009 through 2013 — a problem that is exacerbated by poor road conditions and congestion.

Though it doesn't mean these conditions caused all of these crashes, Moretti said, research shows a lack of lane markings, poor or missing guard rails, and other features contribute to the death toll here and in other states.

There also is a financial cost to commuters and to businesses, transportation advocates have insisted frequently over the past year.

And Moretti said driving on deficient roads costs urban drivers in particular in terms of vehicle repair costs, gasoline, lost time and other safety-related expenses.

TRIP estimates that annual cost to be \$2,236 per person in the Hartford area, \$2,222 in the region surrounding Bridgeport and Stamford, and \$2,050 around New Haven.

Despite these statistics, neither Duff nor other transportation advocates would speculate whether the legislature is likely to support raising additional revenue in 2016 — a state election year — to preserve the existing transportation funding scheme and to maintain and expand it decades into the future.

Duff said he hopes Congress will recognize the need to enhance federal transportation assistance to the states.

But will Connecticut lawmakers seek more revenue less than 12 months after raising annual taxes on residents and businesses by more than \$650 million?

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"I don't want to get ahead of (the governor's study panel) report and what they are going to say," Duff said, adding what's most important now is that "we talk about how important this is to the economic growth of this state."

"There is no single solution," said Karen Burnaska, who served on the former state Transportation Strategy Board and now is coordinator of transit for Connecticut. "But investing in transit is key... More and better transit gives people the options that they need. Safe transportation moves people and goods."

Lyle Wray, executive director of the Capitol Region Council of Governments, said that if Connecticut can find the resources to invest in transportation — not just basic maintenance, but also rapid transit — the economic payoff would be significant.

A Hartford region with a dozen rapid train trips to New York City "would have a huge economic impact on the region... Rapid transit is crucial to be competitive with other parts of the country."