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Report: NH roads, bridges failing fast

By Jennifer Keefe

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DOVER — A grim report on the declining status of New Hampshire's roads, highways and bridges has state officials scrambling to address a funding gap that grows wider each year.

TRIP, a national transportation research group, recently released a report called "New Hampshire Transportation by the Numbers: Meeting the State's Need for Safe and Efficient Mobility."

The report highlights a $74 million transportation funding shortfall in the state that if left unaddressed will lead to continued deterioration in the future.

And with a reported one-third of New Hampshire's 4,500 miles of road in poor condition, nearly one-third of bridges in need of repair or replacement, and a high traffic fatality rate due to road conditions, lawmakers and transportation officials caution something must be done.

"The report underscores, even proves out, the fact I've been saying for five years now that our roads and bridges are getting progressively worse year to year," said Rep. David Campbell, D-Nashua, who serves on the Public Works and Highways Committee.

Knowledge of the declining condition of roads, highways and bridges in the state is indeed nothing new.

Frank Moretti, director of Research and Policy with Trip, said when states wait until improvements are mandatory, the more expensive the project.

"It's cheaper in long run to stay ahead of these issues and make repairs when roads and bridges are in poor condition," Moretti said. "It may be human nature to wait until problem gets so bad that they can't be ignored."

NHDOT Public Information Officer Bill Boynton couldn't agree more, calling it "penny-wise and pound-foolish" to wait on repairs.

"The key is to get to these roads and bridges before the point where they have to be rebuilt," he said. "Our real focus now is on maintenance of the system."

Boynton said a one-mile section of highway costs about $50,000 per year to maintain, but about $1 million to completely repair. And while the state receives about $140 million per year in federal funding for transportation infrastructure costs, Boynton said additional monies won't be found in Washington.

The situation has state lawmakers seeking a viable funding option.

Rep. Campbell has proposed legislation that finds the needed funding in taxpayer dollars.

HB 617, which will be heard in the Public Works and Highways Committee on Tuesday, would raise the road toll — often called the "gas tax" — 12 cents over three years.

This tax hasn't been raised since 1991 during the Governor Judd Gregg administration.

Campbell's bill would also raise the car registration fee $5 over three years.

He said a person driving 12,000 miles per year and getting about 22.5 miles per gallon would pay about $80 more per year in additional road toll and registration fees.

"Measure that against the cost of a realignment," he said.

Campbell's bill would mandate that all money raised in those fees would go toward fixing state and municipal bridges and roads, and he said as a result, it will raise about $1 billion over the next 10 years.

"We can't afford not to do this because the costs get more expensive each year," he said. "We're being fiscally irresponsible not to do it and we're handing debt down to future generations."

However, the New Hampshire Motor Transport Association is opposed to Campbell's bill, saying it would cost the trucking industry too much and is simply too great a tax burden.

"We think it's just a big ask," said Robert Sculley, president of the NHMTA, adding the bill would increase costs for each truck by an average of $2,200 per year with the new taxes and fees.

"I think the problem that's out there — the major difference between cars and trucks — is we only average 5.8 miles per gallon," Sculley said. "This increase just jacks that."

Sculley said it already costs $11,000 annually to operate a truck — including the car tax, registration, the heavy vehicle use fee, tire tax, and state fuel tax.

He noted that number does not include tolls, permits, the oil tax and antifreeze or other fluids.

"The ones it hurts the most are the small guys," he said, and predicted the burden will be felt by consumers as product prices increase to cover the heightened costs of transporting them.

According to the TRIP report, 63 percent of goods shipped annually from sites in New Hampshire are carried by trucks, and another 26 percent are carried by similar transportation services.

Campbell's bill would spread the 12 cent road toll increase out over six years for the trucking industry instead of three, and Campbell argued truckers benefit already from New Hampshire having lower gas prices than other states.

And, Campbell added, "They do more damage as an industry to our roads. They need to pay their fair share."

The NHMTA may not be supporting Campbell's bill, but they have thrown their support behind a proposal from Sen. Chuck Morse, R-Salem, that would allocate revenues from a casino to fund transportation infrastructure.

"Now we have an option out there that comes from gaming and doesn't tax our people or anyone in the state," Sculley said.

During her budget release speech on Thursday, Gov. Maggie Hassan referenced both proposals and said she's prepared to take on the issue.

"I stand ready to work with any member of either party who is willing to bring constructive, long-term ideas to the table so we can build a consensus solution that will help us begin to improve our roads and bridges and finish I-93," Hassan said.

Completion of the I-93 corridor widening project is currently $250 million short, and Campbell warned if it doesn't see funding, the project will stop at Exit 3 and not reach the critical split to Manchester.

"That road will fail," he said. "It'll go back to what it was."

Boynton noted the high number of traffic accidents occurring on I-93 daily, which lead to backups that impede people's commutes to work.

The TRIP report highlights a high level of traffic accidents on roads around the state — primarily rural roads — due to maintenance issues. New Hampshire saw an average of 119 fatalities annually caused by traffic accidents between 2007 and 2011, and the fatality rate on the state's non-Interstate rural roads is 3.5 times higher than on other state roads.

Moretti, of TRIP, said every state experiences higher fatalities on rural roads.

"That's an obvious place to look when you're looking to reduce traffic fatalities, and states are really approaching that," Moretti said. "But the other part is engineering — making sure the roadway environment is as safe as possible. "

Attention being paid to the whole problem by New Hampshire lawmakers is something Moretti said is happening in more states around the country.

"What we're seeing this year as we travel from state to state as legislators grapple with these issues is increased awareness that these challenges are getting worse, funding isn't going to come from Washington and solutions have to come from state and local governments," Moretti said. "We're reaching critical mass in a number of states, especially in New Hampshire. State elected officials are realizing this problem is getting worse and recognizing that the real issue is investing in the state's future."