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Report: NH lags on road upkeep

By KEVIN LANDRIGAN

Staff Writer

CONCORD – While a Senate panel discussed tearing down three toll booths in Merrimack and nixing \$2.5 million a year in toll revenue, a new national report found that every year the state is falling \$74 million behind keeping up with its aging road and bridge infrastructure, costing the average motorist \$323 in motor vehicle repairs.

The report from TRIP, a nonprofit, national research group, is aimed at buttressing the case for raising state gasoline taxes and registration fees that are currently pending before the House of Representatives.

“New Hampshire faces a significant funding shortfall in the cost to maintain its roads, highways and bridges in their current condition and a significant backlog in the cost of repairing all deficient roads and bridges,” the report states.

“Meeting the state’s need for a well-maintained, safe and reliable network of roads, highways and bridges will enhance New Hampshire’s economy by creating jobs.”

Rep. David Campbell, D-Nashua, is authoring the bill (HB 617) to raise over three years the state’s gasoline tax to 30 cents per gallon up from the current 18 cents.

He would further reinstate by 2016 a \$15 surcharge on annual car and truck registrations that the Republican-led Legislature did away with two years ago.

“This report echoes our argument that there is a systemic need for a 10-year investment in new revenue to address a backlog of improvements to our highway system,” said Campbell, who chairs the House Public Works Committee.

On Tuesday, Senate President Peter Bragdon, R-Milford, urged the Senate Ways and Means Committee to approve a bill he is sponsoring to get rid of tolls on Exits 10, 11 and 12 on the F.E. Everett Turnpike in Merrimack. State Department of Transportation officials oppose the bill.

In recent weeks, Campbell has been lobbying for support of his proposal from business groups along with meeting privately with Gov. Maggie Hassan, House Speaker Terie Norelli, D-Portsmouth and key state senators.

The House panel Campbell runs will take testimony on his bill next Tuesday.

“This transportation system forms the backbone that supports the Granite State’s economy,” the report concluded.

Other findings from the report are:

Poor Condition Roads: Currently, 37 percent of state-maintained roads are classified this way and without further investment that number will raise to 43 percent by 2016, the report said.

Rough Road Cost: Higher operating costs total \$323 million to drive on N.H. roads with the highest repair bills facing (\$503) facing those in southern New Hampshire, according to the report.

Deteriorating Bridges: The report found almost a third of state bridges, 31 percent, show some wear or don’t meet current design standards. Without further funding, that number will rise 16 percent by 2016.

Rural Fatalities: State highway crashes ending in death here are below the national average but the fatality rate on rural, non-Interstate roads is 3.5 times greater than the rest of the state.

“Improving safety features on New Hampshire’s roads and highways would likely result in a decrease in traffic fatalities and serious crashes in the state,” the report said.

“Roadway features are likely a contributing factor in approximately one-third of all fatal and serious traffic crashes.”

Importance of Roads to Business: Site Selection magazine’s 2010 survey of corporate real estate executives found that transportation infrastructure was the third most important factor in site-location decisions, behind only work force skills and state and local taxes.

TRIP is sponsored by insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, distributors and suppliers; businesses involved in highway and transit engineering and construction; labor unions; and organizations concerned with efficient and safe transportation.

Kevin Landrigan can be reached at 321-7040 or klandrigan@nashuatelegraph.com. Also, follow Landrigan on Twitter (@Klandrigan).