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Gas tax, registration hikes would help fund repairs, lawmaker says

By GARRY RAYNO
State House Bureau

CONCORD - The chairman of the House Public Works and Highways Committee says a bill he is sponsoring would raise the gas tax and car registration fees to help cover the cost of road repairs a national transportation research group says are necessary. The average Granite State driver spends \$323 annually in vehicle maintenance and repairs due to the conditions of the state's roads and bridges and southern New Hampshire drivers pay \$503 annually, according to a report on the state's roads and bridges released by TRIP, a national transportation research group founded by industry businesses.

The group estimates the state needs to spend \$1.3 billion to address the current backlog of needed pavement and bridge work.

"New Hampshire's highways and bridges are the backbone of the state's economy," said Frank Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP at a press conference Tuesday. "But it is a backbone that is bending."

The group notes the state Department of Transportation faces a \$74 million annual shortfall in money needed just to maintain current road and bridge conditions, adequately fund winter maintenance and complete the widening of Interstate-93 from Manchester to the Massachusetts border.

"Continuing to delay the maintenance and repair of our roads and bridges jeopardizes public safety, increases needless vehicle repair costs and is fiscally irresponsible," said House Transportation Committee Chairman Candace Bouchard. "It can cost taxpayers up to five times as much to rebuild a road or a bridge due to the delay of routine maintenance."

House Public Works and Highways Chairman David Campbell, D-Nashua, is the prime sponsor of House Bill 617, which would increase the gas tax by 12 cents and vehicle registration fees by \$15 over a three-year period, raising an estimated \$1 billion in 10 years. Cities and towns would receive \$200 million and the state the rest for its roads and bridges.

Campbell noted that his bill won't take care of the entire problem with the state's highway system but would reduce the severity of the problem and the number of bridges and roads in poor condition.

He noted the average driver traveling 12,000 miles a year would pay an additional \$80 versus the \$323 cost of vehicle repair and maintenance due to poor road conditions.

"At some point the math becomes overwhelming and it becomes very clear what we have to do," Campbell said. "We have to face facts that not fixing (our highway

system) is fiscally irresponsible and impacts our economic well being and ability to compete for jobs."

According to the report, 37 percent of the state's roads are in poor condition, 44 percent in fair condition and 19 percent in good condition.

The state currently has 140 red-listed bridges that need replacing with 353 overall including cities and towns, noted State Transportation Department Commissioner Chris Clement. The list grows each year but the money to replace them has remained the same since 1994, he said.

"Now is the time to get these projects going," Clement said. "It is never going to be less costly than it is now."

Unless the state increases funding for repairs, the problem is going to grow significantly in the future, with traffic expected to increase by 25 percent by 2030.

TRIP officials are traveling around the country presenting similar reports. Moretti said no additional money for highways is coming from the federal government, so it will be up to states to address the problems with highway infrastructure.

grayno@unionleader.com