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EDITORIAL

Editorial: Road and bridge report supports plan to fix roads

Most of us who drive on roads in West Virginia know their condition is less than ideal. But once again, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., has come up with a report that puts some numbers to just how bad they are.

The organization known as TRIP yearly analyzes the condition of roads and bridges in every state in the country, and its latest report underscores that the Mountain State is losing ground. That, too, should come as no surprise because state policy makers have been unable or unwilling to invest much money in infrastructure for years. Meanwhile, that trend continues to cost West Virginians money.

The latest report, released last week in the Capitol, indicated that road conditions in the Huntington area costs a driver an average of \$1,121 per year when factoring in higher vehicle operating costs, traffic fatalities and congestion-related delays. And Huntington drivers were luckier than people in other parts of the state. In Charleston, TRIP put the annual toll at \$1,357 a year in additional expenses.

TRIP is supported by manufacturing, insurance, construction, labor and engineering organizations, so some may conclude that they have a vested interest in reporting poor conditions to spur more spending on highways and bridges. But even if that is the case, the organization helps provide comparisons to other states.

In West Virginia's case, TRIP reported that 29 percent of major roads were in poor condition in 2015, while 55 percent were in mediocre or fair condition. For comparison, in TRIP's 2004 report,

10 percent of the state's roads were rated in poor condition and 26 percent were graded as fair.

Also, West Virginia had the fifth highest percentage of bridges rated structurally deficient, at 17 percent. Just the year before, the state's percentage of structurally deficient bridges was 12th highest in the nation, another sign that the state is losing ground.

Besides the costs in dollars, there is the toll in lives. West Virginia's 2015 overall traffic fatality rate of 1.35 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel was significantly higher than the national average of 1.13, TRIP reported.

The grim and disheartening numbers should prompt the state's lawmakers and its public to give serious consideration to one of Gov. Jim Justice's major initiatives in his recent State of the State address. He is proposing the state sell \$2.8 billion in road bonds to build and upgrade the state's highways. The debt created by that bond sale would be paid off with a \$20 increase in the annual license plate renewal fee, a 10-cent-a-gallon increase in the state gasoline tax (estimated to cost average drivers about \$130 a year), and a \$1 increase in tolls on the West Virginia Turnpike.

Justice's main pitch for his plan is that it will create 48,000 jobs, something that the state badly needs to boost its economy. But the latest report by TRIP underscores the need for more investment in our roads from two other perspectives - the costs that motorists already are paying and the lives that are lost on poor roads.