TOP 50 TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS IN ALABAMA

GAS, FUEL TAXES CALLED THE CURE

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The Top 50 transportation projects in Alabama would cost $4.6 billion to address.

The "deteriorated and congested conditions," threaten Alabama's economic growth and development, according to a report released Thursday by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based national transportation research organization.

And the majority of revenue to pay the bills would come from proposed gasoline and fuel tax increases, said Rep. Mac McCutcheon, R-Huntsville, who chairs the Legislature's Joint Transportation Committee.

"The time is now, we don't have the option of doing nothing," he said. "The committee has looked at transportation needs across the state in five regional meetings.

"We have to make sure the people of Alabama know the need is there. Now is the time, let's step up and address this issue."

McCutcheon declined to give a range of proposed fuel and gas tax increases, saying work still needs to be done to come up with "fair" amounts. Currently the state levies a gas tax and two excise taxes on gasoline, which add up to 16 cents a gallon, according to "A Legislator's Guide to Alabama Taxes" published by the state. The amount is set to go up to 18 cents on Oct. 1, due to the gasoline inspection fee moving over.

The gasoline tax last went up in 1955 to seven cents a gallon. A four-cent per gallon excise tax went into effect in 1980 and the other five-cent per gallon excise tax was created in 1992.

Of the Top 20 projects on the TRIP list, two in the River Region. Coming in at No.9 is the the widening of Highway 14 from the end of its four lane section in Millbrook to Highway 143 in Elmore. The report sets the cost at $3.69 million. At No. 12 is a "freeway" bypass around Montgomery, coming in at a cost of $91.16 million.

For Paula Varner, of Millbrook, it all comes down to economics. She was fueling her Hyundai Elantra at the Entec Station in Millbrook on Thursday afternoon.

"No, no, no, no," she said when asked is she supported raising gas and fuel taxes. "Gas prices have just gotten down to where they're not killing the folks who work for a living, and now they want to raise taxes.

"Politicians always have their hands out."

Melvin Little has a different view.

"I use the roads, I don't mind helping to pay for needed road work," said the Prattville resident, who drives a Ford F-250 pickup. "But any increase, I want it to go to actually working on the road, not jobs for bureaucrats in some office or buying trucks or equipment for the state highway department."

Any increase in taxes should be considered an investment, officials say.

"We cannot ignore the fact that economic development and infrastructure are one in the same," said William Canary, president and CEO of the Business Council of Alabama. "The TRIP report highlights the infrastructure needs that our Legislature must address. From our highways and bridges to our ports and waterways as well as our rail and intermodal facilities, these networks are Alabama's arteries for commerce."