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TRANSPORTATION

Road report spurs toll talk

By Bill Cummings

HARTFORD — Congested and deteriorating roads in the Bridgeport-Stamford area cost drivers an average of nearly \$2,400 annually and forces motorists to waste 49 hours a year — the most in the state — while stalled in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

The latest report by TRIP, a national transportation watchdog, paints an alarming picture of the condition of Connecticut's roads and bridges overall, and the price paid by drivers and commuters.

"The numbers in Connecticut are high, among the highest in the nation," said [Carolyn Bonifas Kelly](#), a TRIP spokeswoman, referring the state's ranking as having among the worst roads nationally.

The report came only hours before the [General Assembly's](#) majority [Democrats](#) on Tuesday released a budget plan that includes authorizing electronic tolls across the state, a move estimated to generate \$18 billion over 20 years to fix roads and bridges.

"We are standing on the precipice of tragedy," said state Rep. [Tony Guerrero](#), D-Rocky Hill and co-chairman of the Legislature's [Transportation Committee](#).

"According to the TRIP report, a majority of our roads are in poor or mediocre condition," Guerrero said. "With electronic tolls we could have a dedicated revenue stream to lock away and ensure funding for our roads and bridges for decades to come."

But whether tolls can pass the full Legislature remains an open question, considering strong Republican opposition.

"It's a terrible idea," said State Sen. [Toni Boucher](#), R-Wilton and co-chairman of the Transportation Committee. "We are adamant as a caucus against tolls."

Electronic option

The decision by Democrats to include tolls in their latest budget proposal to close a \$2.3 billion deficit sets up a battle

between minority Republicans and Democratic Gov. [Dannel P. Malloy](#).

Malloy did not call for tolls in his latest budget proposal, despite his 30-year, \$100 billion plan to improve the state's road, rail and bridge systems.

A Republican budget also on the table rejects tolls and promises to pay for billions of dollars in needed infrastructure upgrades by selling bonds and reorganizing spending priorities.

Guerrera said tolls are the only realistic way to pay for needed highway and bridge repairs.

"If we don't do something soon it's only going to get worse and worse," Guerrero said, adding federal dollars for road and bridge repair are increasingly scarce.

"That's why many of us support electronic tolling," Guerrero. "It's a serious revenue stream. If not, we are just hurting ourselves and our economy."

Under the Democrats' budget, the state [Department of Transportation](#) would be authorized to develop tolling across the state, possibly at some borders and along sections of highways, such as stretches of Interstate 95 and I-84, where congestion is worse.

Tolls could be charged only during peak times and discounts could be offered to state residents.

Boucher said Republicans will not support tolls, although she acknowledged a tie vote in the Senate — now evenly divided between the GOP and Democrats — could be broken by Lt. Gov. [Nancy Wyman](#), a Democrat.

"Let them go ahead and do it," Boucher said. "(Wyman) wants to run for governor. Let her run on the fact that she put in tolls."

Work needed

The TRIP report is clear about Connecticut's need to improve its transportation system, noting nearly four

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