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Report: Connecticut highways and road system getting rocky

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NORWALK -- Reconstruction of an interchange linking Interstate 95 to Route 7 in Norwalk is just one of many congestion-busting road, highway and transit upgrades statewide that are likely to languish without more federal money, State Sen. Bob Duff, D-Norwalk, said.

"Our economy is in the cross hairs of whether we do nothing or something about this," Duff told a group of officials Thursday.

Duff, vice chairman of the General Assembly's Transportation Committee and State Sen. Donald DeFronzo, D-New Britain, were among the elected officials and construction industry representatives who gathered in Norwalk for release of a report on Connecticut's transportation funding needs and congestion effects. The report was released by TRIP, a nonprofit organization based out of Washington and funded by construction industry manufacturers, distributors, and suppliers.

The report highlights federal and state statistics from the Federal Highway and National Highway Traffic Safety administrations, along with the

Texas Transportation Institute, on current and projected delays and structural condition of the state's roads, bridges, and transit facilities.

"This report clearly frames and quantifies Connecticut's transportation needs and offers a compelling argument for the need to have a planning process to provide funding for these projects," DeFronzo said.

Some facts highlighted by the report are:

Serious automobile crashes in the Bridgeport-Stamford area, in which roadway design is a contributing factor, are estimated to cost individual drivers \$263 a year.

In 2008, the National Highway Safety Administration concluded 45 percent of Connecticut's roads were in poor or mediocre condition, even as total traffic has increased by 19 percent since 1990.

Without additional highway capacity, rush-hour traffic delays in the Bridgeport-Stamford area by 2030 will more than double, from 25 to 62 percent longer than non-rush hour trips.

Frank Moretti, a research director for TRIP, which collates similar reports in other states, said the information is meant to raise public awareness about the effects of transportation problems.

"Connecticut is falling behind in maintaining its infrastructure," Moretti said. "Without addressing necessary projects it will increase the cost of repairing and operating the system."

The DOT's Bureau of Policy & Planning estimated in January this year that there are \$3.75 billion in unfunded projects in the agency's 2010-2014 capital budget, and an additional \$8.5 billion in unfunded expansion projects in years beyond that.

Without Congressional approval of a new Surface Transportation Act, Norwalk Mayor Richard Moccia said he is concerned about the possible effect of leaving the Interstate 95/Route 7 interchange project, estimated to cost \$78.8 million, incomplete.

Moccia said a major spending initiative would also employ in-state construction trade professionals who have are jobless as a result of a recession.

"We can see the backups which occur almost continually," Moccia said. "If these funds are put into transportation those people will have jobs and when they have jobs the economy will start growing again."

The report also cites a 2009 report compiled by the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission that estimated a \$225 billion investment in transportation infrastructure would be needed annually for the next 50 years to make necessary repairs and improvements in order to provide a well-functioning transportation system.

Don Shubert, executive director of the Connecticut Construction Industry Association, said a much more prolonged spending infusion on transportation is needed to reverse the state's economic slump.

"We all know transportation, jobs, and economic development are closely related," Shubert said. "With enough funding, we can modernize our transportation system and improve the economy with new jobs."

Since March 2007, the number of construction jobs in Connecticut has fallen from 69,200 to 50,200, with roughly 3,900 of those jobs being lost in the past 12 months, Salvatore Dipillo, a state Department of Labor statistics administrator, said.

"Some of the job sectors have had small recoveries but not that one," Dipillo said. "It is probably the hardest hit sector of any in the past two years."