

State's highway situation bleak



By Jim Beam/American Press

When it comes to Louisiana's highways and bridges, the news never gets better. An effort is under way to try and come to grips with the state's terrible infrastructure, but success may continue to be elusive.

The latest bad news comes from TRIP, a national transportation research group. Its most recent report talks about the 60th birthday of the interstate highway system and Louisiana figures prominently in three categories.

Louisiana is one of 10 states with the greatest share of their interstate highways in poor or mediocre condition and one of 10 states with the highest traffic fatality rates on interstate highways in 2014. The state is first among the 10 that saw the greatest increase in vehicle miles of travel on their interstate systems from 2000 to 2014. Louisiana's rate increased 43 percent.

The increased travel appears to be a national trend, and one that is characteristic of interstate travel in Louisiana. TRIP said the interstate system faces increasing congestion, unprecedented levels of travel — particularly by large trucks — and insufficient funding to make needed repairs and improvements.

Louisiana motorists traveling Interstates 10 and 20 can certainly identify with those conditions. Those of us who have had to make numerous trips east of Lake Charles along Interstate 10 are still wondering what happened to the long-delayed plans to improve that horrible stretch from Lafayette to the Atchafalaya Basin Bridge.

Carinsurance.com issued another critical report in mid-June. It said Louisiana has the third worst driving environment when road and bridge conditions, traffic fatalities, car insurance and other factors are calculated.

The Advocate said the news came a day after another report called Baton Rouge the second most dangerous city to drive in nationally. Detroit was in first place.

The report said 62 percent of our roads are rated poor or mediocre and 29 percent of our bridges are listed as structurally deficient.

Louisiana motorists spend \$2,819 a year to insure their vehicles, second behind Michigan. And nearly 14 percent of drivers don't have car or truck insurance.

Looking at these and other findings, it's no surprise that Louisiana has a \$12.7 billion backlog of road and bridge needs and essential projects that would cost another \$10.5 billion. New bridges needed at Lake Charles and Baton Rouge are among those latter projects.

OK, so what's the good news?

Gov. John Bel Edwards, his transportation secretary and good government groups appear to be ready to tackle a severely neglected highway and bridge system. The governor last week named the 18 members of a transportation task force appointed to come up with solutions.

Unfortunately, it's going to take new revenues and you can already hear the governor's critics saying, "Here we go again, more taxes." However, other solutions are also possible, including federal grants and loans, tolls, state money and public-private partnerships.

Calcasieu Parish has come up with another plan. The Police Jury is teaming up with the state Department of Transportation and Development to add capacity improvements like widening state highways within the parish. It is another avenue for getting the most efficient use from transportation dollars.

Shawn Wilson, the secretary of DOTD, said the \$23 billion in state transportation needs can't be erased all at once. He added that maintenance also has to be considered along with new construction.

Edwards has said he is open to finding money for roads once the state budget is stabilized, something lawmakers are supposed to do at their 2017 session. He said earlier a higher gasoline tax would definitely be considered once the budget stabilization is complete.

The Louisiana Good Roads and Transportation Association favors a 10-cent increase in the 20-cent state gasoline tax that hasn't changed since 1989. With the 18.4-cents-per-gallon federal tax, the total Louisiana tax is 38.4 cents per gallon.

Mississippi is at 36.8 cents, Texas at 38.4 cents, Alabama at 39.3 cents and Arkansas at 40.2 cents per gallon. The national federal and state average is 48.6 cents per gallon. California has the highest total tax at 69 cents per gallon. Alaska is lowest at 31 cents per gallon.

Perhaps the most important consideration is for the transportation task force to get public input on whatever solutions are recommended. Wilson said it wants to hear from citizens and know what they are willing to accept.

Edwards started reform of the state's capital construction legislation at the regular and special sessions. His goal is to eliminate projects that have little hope of being funded, curb the inclusion of local projects in the bill and dedicate more construction money for roads and bridges.

Like other reforms, legislators were slow to accept the changes all at once. So the process is going to take longer than it should.

Lafayette isn't waiting for state help and has resurrected its effort to build a toll road loop around its city.

"The state doesn't have any money. I don't see us waiting on that," said a member of the Lafayette Metropolitan Expressway Commission.

The same thing is true for the new I-10 bridge needed at Lake Charles, but state help appears to be our only hope. A state effort to fund the project in 2015 didn't come close. And judging from tax resistance at the two special sessions of the Legislature, it isn't likely we will be seeing a new bridge anytime soon.