

## Highway funding cuts could undercut Kansas road improvements, group warns

BY BRAD COOPER – THE KANSAS CIT STAR

A national transportation group said Wednesday that Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback's plan to take about \$100 million out of the state highway department could undercut improvements made with the state's current road plan.

"If that funding is allocated elsewhere, it could have a dire effect on the transportation system," said Carolyn Bonifas Kelly, associate research director for the The Road Information Program.

"That could mean projects aren't completed, deterioration continues and some of the roads become more congested and inefficient," Kelly said at a news conference in Overland Park. "If the transportation system doesn't remain a priority, you could hamper quality of life in the state."

Based in Washington, D.C., the group — often referred to as TRIP — frequently assesses road conditions across the country using federal and state highway data. It is funded partly by highway contractors.

Kansas roads have benefited from a sales tax increase passed in 2010 that has helped financed a 10-year, \$8 billion transportation plan.

The plan has led to the improvement of more than 7,700 miles of state roads since 2010, according to the TRIP report. The plan is expected to fund the improvement of 5,000 more miles within the next five years.

It also is paying for major highway expansion projects, including the new interchange at Interstate 35, Interstate 435 and Kansas 10 in

Lenexa and another interchange serving the new rail shipping yard in Gardner.

However, the report found that 29 percent of all roads maintained by the state and local governments are in poor condition, meaning they show signs of wear including cracking and potholes. About 45 percent of local- and state-maintained roads were listed in mediocre to fair condition.

Over the years, Kansas governors and lawmakers have dipped into the state highway fund to offset revenue shortfalls.

Since fiscal year 2011, the state has transferred \$1.2 billion out of the state highway fund into general state operations.

The Brownback administration says the proposed transfer of money out of the highway department — subject to legislative approval — will not affect projects in the current highway plan.

It says project costs are coming in under budget and that federal and state revenues are beating estimates.

However, TRIP warns that the current federal highway plan expires this May. Without sustained federal funding, many state highway projects will be in jeopardy.

"The state has stepped up to the plate and provided additional funds," Kelly said. "But it also will be critical the federal government also does its part to ensure adequate transportation funding."