A national contractors group voiced its support for Gov. Jim Justice’s proposed infrastructure plan Wednesday, saying it would create jobs in the area seeing one of the sharpest declines in construction jobs nationwide.

“Proposals like the governor’s will bring more workers into the economy,” said Ken Simonson, chief economist of the Associated General Contractors of America, in an announcement at the state Capitol about Charleston’s construction job losses. “Without increased funding, West Virginia infrastructure will continue to crumble and jobs will disappear.”

Under Justice’s plan, an estimated $2.8 billion in bonds would be sold to fund various highway and infrastructure projects. The bonds would be paid for by raising the Division of Motor Vehicles license fee from $30 to $50, raising and extending tolls on the West Virginia Turnpike and raising the excise tax on gasoline by 10 cents per gallon, among other methods.

The Charleston metro area experienced a 16 percent drop in construction jobs between April 2016 and April 2017, the second-sharpest decrease out of 358 metro areas nationwide, according to an analysis by the association released Wednesday.

Simonson said the employment decline is particularly concerning, since Charleston was once one of the fastest-growing construction job markets in the country after the latest recession.

“What makes these job losses even more frustrating is the fact many of them could have been avoided,” he said. “Yet, too many construction firms that work on vital infrastructure projects are seeing less work today than just a few years ago.”

Charleston’s 6,200 people employed in the construction, mining and logging sectors in April is the lowest total for the month in more than 25 years, the analysis said. West Virginia as a whole saw a 2 percent decrease in those sectors, while the Huntington-Ashland metro area saw a 6 percent decrease.

Justice’s proposal would “cost less than doing nothing” and provide immediate employment opportunities, Transportation Secretary Tom Smith said at the announcement. Smith cited a February report from the national transportation association TRIP that said poor road conditions cost West Virginia drivers $1.4 billion because of factors ranging from repair costs to lost time from traffic congestion.

“This is frustrating and bad news, very distressing news,” Smith said of Charleston’s construction job losses. “We cannot afford this cost of doing nothing. We have to make infrastructure investments.”

Smith said the lack of infrastructure investment in recent years has created a “perfect storm” for job loss. Increased fuel efficiency in cars has reduced potential gas tax revenue that could have funded various projects, he added.

Charleston’s bleak outlook for construction jobs differed from the majority of metro areas, according to the analysis. The group said 217 out of 358 metro areas saw an increase in construction employment, partly due to demand from the private sector.

But the United States as a whole has experienced a decline in public-works spending, dropping 8.5 percent since last year, which could hurt employment levels. Sewage and waste disposal investments were particularly affected, dropping by 22 percent.

The group’s state chapter, the Contractors Association of West Virginia, is gathering support to get Justice’s plan implemented, Simonson said.

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