



Lawmakers Debate Gas Tax, State Infrastructure Needs Weighed

Written by Press Room

Just in time to provide fodder in support of increasing Montana's gas tax, The National Transportation Research Group has released a report called TRIP that concludes that Montana will face an \$874 million annual shortfall through 2021 in improving road, highway and bridge conditions, traffic safety and modernizing its transportation system.

"While the state will be able to address some needed projects with existing funding, numerous needed projects will not move forward at least through 2022." The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) estimates it needs \$1.46 billion annually to meet its needs.

The Montana Infrastructure Coalition, a group of various organizations and local government agencies, is proposing an increase in Montana's gas tax to meet those needs. A bill that would do that, HB 473, has been introduced by State Rep. Frank Garner, R-Kalispell. It would impose an increase in tax of 8 cents a gallon, promising to generate \$61 million more dollars annually for state roadways, and raise the Montana gas tax from 27 cents to 36 cents. \$23.5 million of the increased revenue would be channeled to cities and counties for local projects.

Montana's current gas tax is higher than 56% of the other 50 states and the state ranks as having the 22nd highest tax of the 50 states. Montana has not raised its gas tax since 1993 and consumption is not increasing as rapidly as it used to, say supporters.

Objections to the tax come from legislators who say the state can fully fund its highway budget by cutting the budget elsewhere, and in fact, that has preliminarily been done in an alternative proposal, but say others, that proposal is likely to be unwound

before it gets through the process. Opposition comes from both sides of the aisle, but less so by Republicans than Democrats. Most Democrats are holding back, wanting to see substantial Republican support for the gas tax, as well as for a proposed income tax increase so that their support cannot be used against them politically in the future.

Focusing on 50 road, highway and bridge projects that currently cannot proceed in Montana because of a lack of funding, the report states that MDT has delayed \$144.5 million in road projects that had been scheduled to begin in 2017 because of a lack of adequate funding.

According to the TRIP study, vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in Montana increased by 32 percent from 2000 to 2015 –from 9.9 billion VMT in 2000 to 13 billion VMT in 2015. This was the fifth largest increase in VMT in the nation during that time. VMT in Montana is anticipated to increase by another 25 percent by 2030.

Montana's overall traffic fatality rate of 1.58 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel in 2014 was the third highest in the U.S., much higher than the national average of 1.08.

Thirty-four percent of Montana's major urban roads are in poor condition. In the Billings, Great Falls and Missoula urban areas, 30 percent, 52 percent and 26 percent of major roads are in poor condition, respectively. Annually, \$101 billion in goods are shipped to and from sites in Montana, mostly by truck.

The TRIP study was sponsored by insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, distributors and suppliers; businesses involved in highway and transit engineering and construction; labor unions; and other organizations.