



## EDITORIAL

## Gazette opinion: How to lower Montana's bill for bad roads



GARNER

Montana is paying big bucks for bad roads. The tab is around \$794 million a year, according to a study commissioned by the Montana Infrastructure Coalition. The infrastructure coalition is composed of Montana government, business and economic development groups. TRIP, a national transportation research group, used data from the Montana Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration to estimate costs of additional wear and tear on vehicles, crashes resulting from unsafe roads and fuel wasted in congested traffic areas. The totals are eye-popping:

- \$328 million annually in costs related to crashes on unsafe roads.
- \$296 million in vehicle operating costs caused by poor roads.
- \$170 million for fuel and time wasted due to traffic congestion.

In Billings, TRIP estimated that 30 percent of arterials are in poor condition and only 33 percent are in good condition. Great Falls is even worse off with 52 percent poor roads and 18 percent good. Statewide, only 26 percent of major roads are rated in good condition, and 34 percent are poor. Statewide, 8 percent of bridges are structurally deficient, which means “there is significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other components.” The cost of road safety hazards is reflected in Montana’s abysmal highway fatality statistics. Montana’s traffic fatality rate is nearly 50 percent worse than the national average on the basis of miles

traveled. Only two other states have a higher fatality rate. Most fatal crashes occur along Montana’s rural highways. The number of vehicle miles traveled in our state has increased by 32 percent since the turn of the century. That increased road use demands attention. MDOT has estimated that it will be \$874 million short annually of what’s needed to make headway on highway improvements through 2021. Fortunately, Montana doesn’t have to pay that cost all by itself. The federal government funds about 87 percent of the state’s road construction budget. Montana must come up with 13 percent. For decades, that state match has come from the state fuel tax of 27 cents per gallon of gas and diesel, with exemptions for agricultural use. The cost of maintaining safe roads has outpaced tax revenue. The 2017 Legislature and Gov. Steve Bullock must come up with a plan that meets the ongoing need for road improvement. A one-year or two-year fix isn’t sufficient. Highway safety projects are planned months or years in advance and may take multiple construction seasons to complete. Montana must have a reliable, ongoing, dedicated source of funding its road safety responsibility.

It’s time to raise the state fuel tax to meet this public safety need.

For more than a year, we’ve heard Republicans and Democrats expound on their support for state infrastructure improvement, but no one has publicly presented a plan for ongoing support of safer transportation infrastructure. Finally, a leader has stepped up. Rep. Frank Garner, R-Kalispell, has requested a bill that he calls “The Bridge and Road Safety Accountability Act. LC1504 was being drafted last week.

“The mission has got to be to improve road and bridge safety,” said Garner, a former law enforcement officer.

“It’s going to be comprehensive,” Garner told The Gazette last week by phone

from Helena. “Right now it’s kind of in the fact-finding stage; we’re getting ideas.”

The legislation will have three key aims:

1. Identification of ways to make the MDOT more efficient.
2. Revenues for state and local road needs.
3. Accountability to taxpayers.

“We want to make sure we do with this money exactly what we said we would do with it — road and bridge safety,” Garner said.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers has been discussing this legislation. Garner said he wants input from the House and Senate, along with MDOT.

Rep. Kelly McCarthy, D-Billings, is among the legislators working with Garner. The TRIP report identified serious infrastructure needs, McCarthy said.



McCARTHY

As McCarthy said, there is political risk for lawmakers who support any revenue bill.

“Everybody who votes for it is going to get a (campaign) mailer next year saying they voted to raise taxes.”

The risk of doing nothing is far greater. We commend McCarthy, Garner and the other lawmakers who recognize that they were elected to solve public problems that individuals can’t solve on their own. Safe roads are essential to every part of Montana life. Building and maintaining safe transportation infrastructure also creates good jobs, keeping taxpayers’ investment in our state.