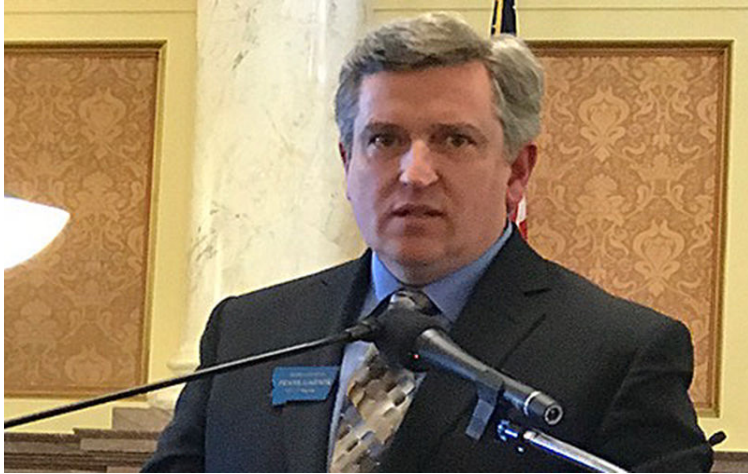


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Poor roads cost Montana drivers \$794 million a year

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Chuck Johnson/Chronicle

Rep Frank Garner, R. Kalispell, speaks at a press conference Thursday about Montana highway funding. He said he will be sponsoring a bill to raise the state fuel gas by an as-yet-to-be-determined amount

HELENA — A new study says that deteriorated, congested and unsafe roads and bridges here cost Montana drivers \$794 million annually in higher vehicle operating costs, crashes and delays.

TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit transportation research group, released the study at a time when highway funding is expected to be a major issue in the 2017 Legislature.

The Montana Infrastructure Coalition, a group comprising contractors, engineers, other business groups, unions and local governments, is proposing, among other ideas, a dime-a-gallon fuel tax increase to help improve state and local roads and bridges. Montana's fuel tax hasn't been raised since 1992.

"We've been talking about our failing infrastructure and lack of funding for a long time now and have very little to show for all that hand-wringing," said Darryl James, executive director of the Montana Infrastructure Coalition. "It's time for a little less talk and a lot more action."

Rep. Frank Garner, R-Kalispell, said he'll sponsor a bill that includes a fuel tax increase, with the amount to be determined. Before looking at revenues, Garner said, he wants to seek out efficiencies in transportation spending. Then he wants to ensure that every new dollar spent on transportation in his bill is accounted for to legislators.

"The mission here is about public safety," said Garner, a former police chief in Kalispell.

The Montana Department of Transportation has estimated it will face an annual funding shortfall of \$874 million through 2021, which could cause many needed projects to be stopped or delayed.

Because of the lack of state highway funds, the department was forced last fall to delay \$144.5 million in road projects that had been scheduled to begin this year. However, Gov. Steve Bullock on Thursday announced he came up with \$10 million from a Medicaid overpayment that will be loaned to the Transportation Department to match the federal money so these projects can be built.

The study found that 34 percent of major urban roads are in poor condition, while 40 percent are deemed in mediocre or fair condition, with 26 percent in good condition, the study said.

It concluded that driving on deteriorated roads costs Montanans an additional \$794 million annually in extra vehicle operating costs, including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs and increased fuel consumption and tire wear.

Nearly 20 percent of bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. It noted that Montana had the third highest traffic fatality rate among the states.

Statistics show 1,024 people died in traffic wrecks in Montana between 2010 and 2014. The study said Montana's overall traffic fatality rate of 1.58 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel is third worst in the nation and significantly higher than the national average.

The TRIP study estimated that insufficient roads cost drivers in the Great Falls area \$1,417 annually, drivers in the Missoula area \$1,152 annually and drivers in the Billings urban areas \$1,113 annually. Figures for other areas of Montana were not released.

"The Montana Infrastructure Coalition is bringing a package of bills supported by a broad spectrum of Montanans," said Webb Brown, president and CEO of the Montana Chamber of Commerce. "We expect some tough discussions but believe Montana lawmakers are ready to step to the plate and work on real solutions to these very problems."