

# Aging roads and bridges take a toll on Montana drivers

By: Keeley Van Middendorp - MTN News

GREAT FALLS - Last Thursday the governor's office announced a \$10 million loan from the state general fund to the highway account to spur \$144 million in delayed state highway projects.

The money would be used to match federal dollars on around 30 projects that have been postponed since November.

Just as the loan was announced, TRIP, a nonprofit transportation research organization, released a report claiming that old, bumpy roads and outdated bridges directly affect the economic well-being of drivers.

In Great Falls, projects jump-started by the loan include adding sidewalks along 14th and 15th Streets North, from 8th Avenue North to the river, a milling project on 8th Avenue North, and work along Smelter Avenue.

But Mike Tooley, director of the Montana Department of Transportation, says the loan is a short-term solution.

"If there isn't a longer-term fix during this session, this list now might pale in comparison to what we'll have to do by the end of the biennium, because we cannot spend the fund into the red," said Tooley.

Tooley asked the Senate Transportation Committee to consider raising the State's gas tax, which hasn't seen an increase since 1994 and is currently set at 27 cents per gallon.

The Montana Infrastructure Coalition is a group of like-minded local governments, businesses and organizations who want infrastructure investment prioritized in the state. The Coalition sees a gas tax increase as a sensible temporary solution.

"The intent there is to fully leverage the federal highway dollars that are available to the state of Montana. And

to make sure we push money down to the city county governments which have been under funded for 30 years," said Montana Infrastructure Coalition Executive Director Darryl James.

The Coalition isn't the only group concerned about aging transportation infrastructure in the state.

TRIP reports driving on damaged or deficient roads costs Montana drivers \$794 million state-wide.

In Great Falls, aging roadways, lost time and fuel from traffic congestion and rising insurance costs from crashes involving conditions of roadways costs motorists more than \$1400 each year.

The report also highlights the need for upgraded bridges, saying nearly 20% of the 188 bridges in the region are in need significant repairs or no longer meet current standards and safety features.

"The report found that in the Great Falls urban area, 52% of the major roads have pavements in poor condition, that's the highest among urban areas in Montana," said TRIP Director of Policy and Research Rocky Moretti.

City Commissioner Bill Bronson says he agrees the area's roadways and bridges are in need of repairs but says it will take time, money and prioritization.

"Money is a huge issue, and until the state realizes that we're probably going to have to raise more revenue in order to either match federal dollars or in cases where federal dollars aren't used have the resources available to do the fix," said Bronson.

The city of Great falls is a member of the Montana Infrastructure Coalition.

Commissioner Bronson says while the Coalition supports raising the gas tax, they are also open to other types of means of raising revenue with the idea that it goes right back into transportation infrastructure.

[Click here to read the complete TRIP report \(PDF\).](#)



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In Great Falls, aging roadways, lost time and fuel from traffic congestion and rising insurance costs from crashes involving conditions of roadways costs motorists more than \$1,400 dollars each year.