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On heels of bridge closure, Transportation head sounds alarm

The Associated Press –Thursday, January 22, 2015

EDISON, N.J. (AP) - In the wake of the partial closure of a heavily traveled bridge in northern New Jersey this week, Transportation Commissioner Jamie Fox warned Thursday that the state's failing roads and bridges cost drivers billions of dollars as the state is running out of money to repair them.

Fox outlined his concerns alongside the release of a report from the nonprofit Washington, D.C.-based research group TRIP.

TRIP's report says New Jersey's roads cost drivers \$11.8 billion a year because of higher operating costs, delays and congestions, and accidents.

The report also says 35 percent of New Jersey's roads are in poor condition while 36 percent of bridges need repair or replacement.

Fox said the transportation trust fund will be "broke" by July 1.

The report came after the partial closure of a bridge that leads to the Lincoln Tunnel this week because of cracks in its support structure. Two other bridges have also recently been closed, one in Franklin and another in Dover.

Fox also ordered the review of nearly 600 structurally deficient bridges in the state this week.

The trust fund brings in about \$1.2 billion in revenue, but those funds pay down the program's debt, while new projects are paid for through bonding and cash infusions from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

By July 1, authority to pay for new projects runs out. Leaders in the Democratic-controlled Legislature have called for raising more revenues - including through raising the state's 14.5-cent gasoline tax. But no plan has gained enough support to be enacted.

Gov. Chris Christie has opposed tax increases but has said all options are on the table. His appointment last year of Fox, who served under Democratic administrations, was viewed as a sign the governor might be willing to compromise with Democrats.