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Others say no tax ahead of Senate debate

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(Photo: Independent Mail file photo)
Wesley Webb and Jimmy Viger of the Anderson County Roads and Bridges Division repair a pothole last year. Bad roads cost each Upstate driver $1,400 a year, a research group says

COLUMBIA - Bad roads in the Upstate are costing each driver almost $1,400 a year in vehicle damage, accidents costs and congestion delays, a national research group said Tuesday

But Lt. Gov. Kevin Bryant of Anderson, some lawmakers and dozens of citizens came to the Statehouse on Tuesday to say the solution to the state's roads problem is not increasing the state gas tax or fees. Their rally came with the slogan, "Tank the Tax."

"I've got one very simple message," Bryant told the audience. "I'm asking South Carolinians to insist on two things: make the Department of Transportation a pure cabinet agency and hands off your wallet. It's that simple."

His comments and the release of a report on state roads came on the eve of Senate debate over a road-funding plan that would raise almost $800 million annually through an increase of 12 cents in the state's gas tax over six years, as well as increases in or creation of a number of fees.

The House earlier this year passed a plan that would raise almost $600 million and address further governance reform at the state Department of Transportation. The Senate plan currently does not address DOT governance. Bryant presides over the Senate.

Sen. Tom Davis, a Beaufort Republican who has championed opposition to raising the gas tax and has filibustered such bills in the past, promised Tuesday to once again "educate" the Senate "for as long as it takes."

Davis said that since 2009 road funding in the state has increased by 120 percent but road conditions have gotten worse.

"This idea that we're not spending enough on roads, that we're kicking the can down the road, that we're not taking care of something in front of us, that's simply a lie," he said.

Davis said citizens have not seen the roads "put in the condition you deserve."

He said DOT should be held accountable by one person -- the governor -- who then is held accountable by voters statewide, instead of the current system in which he said a handful of lawmakers effectively control how road dollars are spent.

Daniel Brennan, state director of the anti-tax group Americans For Prosperity South Carolina, said his group opposes the Senate plan or any increase in the gas tax and fees unless the Legislature also passes DOT reform and the bill is tax revenue neutral, meaning tax cuts are enacted to offset any tax increases.

Darla Booher, the owner of a Greer car dealership, said she came to Columbia with other auto dealers to oppose the proposal to increase the sales tax cap on vehicles from $300 to $600, a move she said would make cars unaffordable for some.

"Say no, it's got to go," she told the rally.

Earlier Tuesday, TRIP, a national non-profit transportation group, released its latest report on road costs for the state, finding that bad roads overall cost drivers $5.4 billion yearly. TRIP, based in Washington, D.C., analyzes infrastructure in states and nationally. It's supported by a coalition of manufacturing, insurance, construction, labor and engineering organizations.

"These conditions are only going to get worse, increasing the additional costs to motorists if greater investment is not made available at the state and local levels of government," said Will Wilkins, TRIP's executive director. "Without adequate funding, South Carolina's transportation system will become increasingly deteriorated and congested, hampering economic growth, safety and quality of life."

Officials attending the release of the TRIP report said the time for action has arrived.

"Making excuses for why we can't pass a bill, those times have passed," said Ted Pitts, president and CEO of the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce.

According to the TRIP report, two-thirds of major locally and state-maintained urban roads are in poor or mediocre condition, 10 percent of locally and state-maintained bridges are structurally deficient, and the state has the highest rate of traffic fatalities in the nation.

Jason Zacher of Greenville, executive director of the Upstate Chamber Coalition, said DOT's maps of Upstate road conditions show the roads to be in fair or poor condition.

"The poor road conditions in the state should surprise nobody," he said. "One of the things the business community has said for years is that while the debate has focused on the cost of the tax increase, we are completely ignoring the cost of inaction, of traffic and longer commutes and the wear and tear on vehicles and the normal degradation of the roads we will have to pay for someday."

TRIP also found that congestion has become more of a problem in South Carolina, the result of vehicle travel increasing 10 percent over the past three years.

For drivers in the Greenville-Spartanburg-Anderson area, bad roads cost an average of $492 annually for each driver in extra vehicle operating costs, including repairs, $378 for accident costs and $509 for lost time and fuel due to congestion, TRIP estimates.

The highest driver costs, according to the report, are in Charleston, where drivers spend an additional $1,850.

Accidents claimed the lives of 4,406 people in the state between 2012 and 2016 and the state currently leads the nation in the fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel, according to TRIP, which also said the rural rate of fatalities is nearly four times higher than on other roads.

Rocky Moretti, director of research and policy at TRIP, said the state's fatality numbers are "staggering."

He said he did not know if TRIP had previously estimated the cost of South Carolina's road conditions.

DOT, which uses a more comprehensive method of rating road conditions, has estimated 54 percent of the state's roads are in poor condition and need to be reconstructed.