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Rough roads cost Myrtle Beach drivers nearly \$1,800 a year, D.C. group says

By Audrey Hudson

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It costs Myrtle Beach drivers nearly \$1,800 in personal time and car operating costs because the state so poorly maintains roads, according to a report released Tuesday by a Washington, D.C. transportation group.

"Our report finds that South Carolina's transportation system is increasingly deteriorated, congested, and not as safe as it could be," said Carolyn Kelly, associate director of research and communications of the research firm called TRIP.

With Myrtle Beach averaging 65 fatalities a year, Kelly said many "could have been prevented had additional safety features been present on state roads" including shoulders, guard rails and increasing the number of lanes.

"The Myrtle Beach area does have among the highest cost per driver in the state as a result of the condition of the transportation system," Kelly said.

These vehicle operating costs are the result of driving on rough roads that beat up vehicles, as well as lost time and wasted fuel from being stuck in traffic, Kelly said.

"This is essentially a hidden tax on the state's drivers at a time when many of them can ill afford it," Kelly said.

The report comes as the state Senate in Columbia is debating a gas tax measure to raise rates to 28 cents a gallon over the next five years, in order to produce \$800 million for transportation funding.

The gas tax increase is supported by the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, which hosted the press conference where the transportation

group's findings were revealed. The event was part of a statewide roll-out of the report, that included press events in Florence, Charleston, Greenville and Columbia.

Kelly said their study was not done at the request of anyone outside of their organization, and that it was self-funded.

No specific recommendations were made in its report, but Kelly said the findings are intended to be used by state lawmakers and to inform citizens about the state of the road system at a time when lawmakers are debating whether to raise gas taxes.

The research group TRIP is funded by insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, labor unions, and businesses involved in highway and transit engineering and construction, according to its web page.

The study was conducted using available data from Federal Highway Administration and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration from 2016.

"South Carolina's network of roads and bridges is literally the backbone of the state's economy," Kelly said.

Citing numerous statistics of traffic and use, she said more than \$300 billion worth of goods travel the state's roads every year.

"The roads are forced to carry a heavy load," Kelly said.

TRIP says that only 34 percent of roads in Myrtle Beach are in "good" shape, while 67 percent are in "mediocre" condition and 23 percent are in a "poor" state of repair.

Additionally, the report found that Myrtle Beach drivers lose about 30 hours each year, or roughly five minutes a day, just sitting in traffic congestion.

Brad Dean, chamber president, called the report findings "very enlightening."

"We think the time is now to pass that tax to help us improve our roads," Dean said.

There are two versions of the tax bill moving through the legislature, and the chamber supports both versions.

The House bill has passed and would raise taxes to 25 cents a gallon, add reforms to the Transportation Department, and give state residents an income tax credit to recoup some of the taxes.

The Senate version strips those additional measures, and raises the tax to 28 cents.

It has not been brought to the floor yet for a vote.

Numerous other fees are included in the gas tax proposal, including an increase in registration fees, sales taxes for used cars, state transfer fees and fees for purchasing hybrid and electric cars.

"No one wants to increase taxes, but sometimes it's a must to move us forward for our road conditions," Dean said.

"Our view is, we've reformed the Department of Transportation endlessly, and reform doesn't build roads," Dean said. "Reforms don't make the road safer, reforms don't create jobs. So we believe reforms that have taken place up till now position the Department of Transportation for the future."

"We support the House and Senate bill, and prefer that the general assembly pass something this year instead of getting held up on a debate over another level of reforms or tax credits," Dean said.

"Having said that, there's good case to be made for the tax credits, because additional costs would hit middle-class taxpayers, and some of those who have to live on a lower income. So, we understand the need for that discussion and we're certainly not opposed to tax credits, but we don't want to see these other issues hold up the very necessary investment in roads.

As for the RIDE III tax initiative that Horry County voters passed last year to raise sales taxes on numerous items by one percent to fund nearly \$600 million in local road construction projects, Dean said that money will build roads, but it won't cover costs to maintain the roads.

Meanwhile, the anti-tax group Americans For Prosperity-South Carolina along with Lt. Gov. Kevin Bryant and Sen. Tom Davis held a rally at the State House Tuesday afternoon to protest the gas tax and urge other lawmakers to kill the bills.

Daniel Brennan, the group's executive director, challenged the endorsement from the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce and says that not all Grand Strand business leaders are on board with the tax hike.

"They don't speak for all of their members, because some of their members will be at my press conference," Brennan said.

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