

Report details pressing need for road funds

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EDDYVILLE -- Nearly 20 percent of county-maintained roads in western Kentucky are in poor condition, according to a report released Tuesday by a national nonprofit transportation research group.

This week, TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based organization, is hosting a public forum - and releasing a report - in each of the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet's 12 highway districts examining the condition of roads and bridges, traffic safety and fatalities, and the most pressing transportation needs.

On Tuesday at the Lyon County Courthouse, Carolyn Bonifas Kelly, TRIP associate director of research and communication, presented the report for District 1, which includes the counties of Ballard, Calloway, Carlisle, Crittenden, Fulton, Graves, Hickman, Lyon, Marshall, McCracken and Trigg.

"Kentucky's transportation network is vitally important," Kelly said. "It's essentially the engine for the state and the engine of economic development progress ... but that engine desperately needs a tuneup."

"The condition and safety of the roads and bridges in west Kentucky, as well as across the state impacts economic growth and development and has a huge impact on the quality of life of the state's residents," she said. "But right now a lack of transportation funding in the state means that the roads and bridges are deteriorated and not as safe as they could be."

Sources of information for the report included a survey of county governments by the Kentucky

Magistrates & Commissioners Association, the Kentucky Office of Highway Safety and the Federal Highway Administration.

According to the report for District 1:

- Survey responses indicated 17 percent of county-maintained roads are in poor condition, 23 percent are in fair condition, and 60 percent are in good condition. Roads rated poor may show signs of deterioration, including rutting, cracks and potholes. Roads rated fair may show signs of significant wear and have visible pavement distress.

- The KMCA survey found that 39 percent of the county-maintained roads need resurfacing, but funding levels in 2017 only allowed resurfacing of 3 percent. The survey also found that 11 percent of the county-maintained roads need reconstruction, but 2017 funding did not allow for any reconstruction.

- Federal Highway Administration data from 2016 indicates 7 percent (123) of the district's 1,752 bridges (that are at least 20 feet long and are included in the National Bridge Inventory) were rated as structurally deficient. Seventy-one of the 123 structurally deficient bridges are posted with weight restrictions, which limit them to carrying lighter vehicles.

- Data from the Kentucky Office of Highway Safety indicates from 2014 to 2016 there were 171 traffic fatalities in the district -- an average of 57 fatalities per year. Fifty-six percent of traffic fatalities during the period were a result of a vehicle

leaving the roadway. There were 601 serious injuries as a result of traffic crashes, an average of 200 serious injuries per year.

"Despite some of the deficiencies noted in the report, it's important to keep in mind that these deteriorated roads and bridges are not a reflection of the capabilities of the organizations that maintain them," Kelly said. "In fact, the local, county, municipal and state departments of transportation are doing a tremendous job with the funds they have available."

While not a lobbying group, TRIP hopes the report "can become part of the conversation" about the need for transportation funding, she said.

Lyon County Judge-Executive Wade White said he is not surprised by the report's findings.

"One of the things we've tried to do here just on a local level is stay ahead of things," White said. "We try to pave as much as we possibly can. The problem is over the past couple of years, the state money that normally comes down (to the county) is decreasing dramatically."

The county's main source of road funding is its share of the state gasoline tax, he said.

The only encouraging thing about the report, White said, "is at least it's data that our legislators can see. It backs up what we've been saying for some time. We're definitely losing this battle right now because we have nowhere else to go. All of our money to do this comes from the state."