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Road study touted by Montgomery officials highlights emerging special-interest support for gas tax

[Brian Edwards](#), Montgomery Advertiser

With the Alabama Legislature convening soon, infrastructure has emerged as a [major topic](#).

Special-interest groups and politicians have recently championed that cause, with some advocating for a gas tax increase to fund the road and bridge projects that will result.

On Monday, Montgomery city and county leaders joined the chamber of commerce, an infrastructure nonprofit, and a construction advocacy group to push for the possible tax bump, citing a recent report showing the cost accrued from poor or mediocre road conditions.

"Alabama's transportation system is truly the backbone of the state," said Carolyn Bonifas Kelly, associate director of research and communication for The Road Information Program (TRIP), a Washington, D.C., nonprofit industry advocacy group backed by construction organizations and insurance interests. "It carries \$432 billion worth of goods into, out of and through the state and it services more than 4 million licensed drivers here in Alabama."



The hosts were Richie Beyer, Elmore County engineer, and John Mark Davis, Autauga County's engineer. The subject was the Alabama

Transportation Rehabilitation and Improvement Program, or ATRIP. Introduced by Gov. Robert Bentley in 2012, the infrastructure program is aimed at investing \$1 billion in Alabama's local roads and bridges. (Photo11: Getty Images/moodboard RF)

Despite the importance of Alabama's roads, Bonifas Kelly outlined several deficiencies.

Around 30 percent of Montgomery's roads are in poor or mediocre condition, according to TRIP. Those rough roads cost the city's drivers an additional \$404 a year in wear and tear and extra gasoline costs. When other factors — such as lost time waiting in traffic and the cost of accidents — the average driver spends \$1,339 more a year.

"At current funding levels, the state will only be spending a fraction of what is recommended in order to build a transportation system that will

allow Alabama to be economically competitive," Bonifas Kelly said.

Though those figures may seem dire, they aren't far off of numbers TRIP released about two years ago.

TRIP isn't the only advocacy group that has emerged in the recent months.

The Alliance for Alabama's Infrastructure, an advocacy group for [construction interests](#), has used a smattering of different tactics to tout the benefits of an increased gas tax to Alabamians. AAI, which is housed and operated by the Business Council of Alabama, has released a deluge of Facebook advertisements since at least July — under the name Fix Our Roads Alabama.



Various leaders, including Montgomery County Commission head Elton Dean, Mayor Todd Strange, talk about the need for a gas tax increase. (Photo11: [Brian Edwards/Advertiser](#))

It also commissioned [an article](#) in Yellowhammer News that warned about the danger of Highway 98, calling it "Bloody 98."

Drew Harrell, executive director for AAI, spoke at Monday's news conference. He said the reports TRIP compiled will "lay the groundwork" for a good portion of the work done in the Alabama Legislature this coming session.

"The more we delay, the more we will have to pay," Harrell said. "It's been 27 years since Alabama adjusted its funding to invest in our road and bridge system and the cost of doing nothing is steadily on the rise."

The Alabama Policy Institute, a conservative think tank, has also jumped in the ring to support the tax increase. Earlier this month, the group released [a paper](#) that outlined guidelines for an increase, which included a recommendation to decrease the grocery tax alongside the gas tax increase.

A smaller effort to stop the gas tax has been mounted as well. Alabama First — The Committee to Stop the Gas Tax has released a smattering of Facebook advertisements.

Despite an interest in infrastructure, there are still several moving parts involved in the political process. In January, legislative leaders were still

judging their parties' interest in a [gas tax increase](#). If passed, the amount of the increase and [the distribution](#) of those funds will also be hotly debated.



The remarks reinforced signals from the Legislature that the state's gas tax, the key source of money for road maintenance, will be a major focus when legislators convene in Montgomery in March. (Photo11: File)

Gov. Kay Ivey will [unveil her infrastructure plan at a news conference Wednesday](#) in Maplesville in Chilton County. Details were not immediately available on Monday.

Mayor Todd Strange stressed on Monday that current funds almost exclusively go toward keeping roads driveable.

"There is very little money for new capacity," he said. "The money is just for maintenance."

Last summer, during the budget process, Montgomery officials indicated about [\\$12 million](#) in funding needs for its local roads.

Strange said without more money the state will struggle to support places such as the Port of Mobile, which relies heavily on road and bridge infrastructure to transport goods to and from Alabama. That commerce provides dollars in many parts of the state, including Montgomery, he said.

Elton Dean, head of the Montgomery County Commission and a mayoral candidate, said how the money will be distributed is a nonissue in Montgomery, because the county and city work closely to improve roads and divvy up dollars.

"It doesn't matter to us," he said, in reference to the money split. "We want the funds so that we can use this money to do what we need to do for the people we represent."

Brian Lyman contributed to this report.