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."

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"At current funding levels, the state will only be able to maintain what we have," Bonifas Kelly said. "It has 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."

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 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.