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Bipartisan support seen for higher Illinois gas tax

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SPRINGFIELD – A new report says subpar roads in Illinois are costing drivers \$1,300 to \$2,600 in repair, safety and congestion costs annually, a figure that will rise without state infrastructure action.

Unveiling the report Wednesday at the Capitol, Illinois Chamber of Commerce representatives joined one Democrat and two Republican lawmakers who said they are ready to take the lead on an infrastructure bill, and all sources of revenue – including hikes to the motor fuel tax and vehicle registration fees – are on the table.

“You can’t build 21st century infrastructure with 1990s money. There isn’t enough efficiency, there isn’t enough reform, you just can’t do it,” said Republican Rep. Margo McDermed, of Mokena. “We still need to look at the fact that our buying power has plummeted because cars are much more efficient and we don’t get as much money in, number one. And, No. 2, inflation. We haven’t raised that (gas tax) number since 1990.”

McDermed joined Sen. Martin Sandoval (D-Chicago) and Don DeWitte (R-St. Charles) in saying an independent report by national transportation research group TRIP demonstrates the cost of inaction on an infrastructure bill. The report estimates drivers in Illinois face \$18.3 billion in annual vehicle costs as a result of rough roads, traffic crashes, and lost time and wasted fuel caused by congestion.

Sandoval, who chairs the Senate committee that has been touring the state to hear from local officials about infrastructure needs, is sponsoring legislation to raise the state’s gas tax by up to 25 cents while also hiking vehicle registration fees. He said his proposal would raise \$2.4 billion in revenue.

“I think it’s a hypocrisy on behalf of our state to consider ourselves to be the crossroads and hub of America when we don’t necessarily take a real public and personal interest in upkeeping our infrastructure. We’ve fallen behind for far too long,” Sandoval said.

Sandoval did not give specifics on what measures lawmakers were considering to drive down labor or project costs rather than upping taxes and fees.

The lawmakers acknowledged increasing fees or the gas tax will be a difficult sell for some of their colleagues, but DeWitte said “literally every number is on the table, because every member is having input into this process.”

McDermed said a 2016 constitutional amendment which mandates the use of gas tax and licensing fee dollars for transportation infrastructure and safety use will ensure new revenues are not diverted from road and bridge projects.

The Chamber supports a measure that would raise the gas tax while phasing out a state sales tax on motor fuel, which is not guaranteed to go to roads. Sandoval, however, said that would phase out about \$600 million from the state’s general revenue fund that would need to be made up elsewhere.