

New report on transportation reveals same old problem

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A truck hauling a horse trailer passes over a bridge on 22 Road between I and J roads on Tuesday.

A new report on the state of Colorado's roads and bridges released Tuesday doesn't reveal anything motorists aren't already familiar with, they are in bad shape.

The group that released that report, the Washington, D.C.-based National Transportation Research Project, also known as TRIP, said that same thing in a similar report just four years ago.

It also mirrors what many state studies, organizations and "blue-ribbon" commissions have been saying for decades: Colorado needs to put a lot more money into its transportation system.

"Weather, traffic crashes, avalanche mitigation and a transportation system meant to support 3.5 million residents instead of today's 5.8 million are constant sources of frustration and a huge expense for families and businesses located west of the Continental Divide," Robin Brown, executive director of the Grand Junction Economic Partnership, said at a virtual press conference releasing the updated report.

"For Coloradans on the West Slope, a shutdown of I-70 costs time, money and resources that we need to survive, particularly during the COVID pandemic," she added. "Rural areas are in desperate need of safe roads and alternative routes to keep the flow of goods and people at

optimal pace, and it's time to pass a solution to Colorado's pressing transportation needs."

Brown said the report shows that more than half of the roads in Mesa County are considered poor or mediocre, and some some haven't been repaved in 50 years.

Part of the issue is that Colorado's 22-cents-a-gallon gasoline tax hasn't been increased since the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights was approved by voters in 1991, when the state's population was at about 3.5 million people.

And in the few times since then that lawmakers waded into the politically dangerous waters of even proposing measures much less actually putting something on the ballot for a tax increase to fund transportation projects, each have failed.

To get around it, lawmakers have hiked various vehicle-registration fees and created special TABOR-approved enterprises, such as the Road & Bridge Fund. In 2017, the Legislature approved a bill that called for \$1.8 billion in certificates of participation, a kind of a bond that doesn't require voter approval, to help fund transportation projects.

This year, lawmakers say they are working on a new measure to do some of the same, including a possible road usage fee, instead of a gas tax, and a special registration fee on electric vehicles.

Though he and others have said this before, Mike Kopp, a former GOP state senator and gubernatorial candidate who now heads Colorado Concern, a well-connected business group, says lawmakers are in promising negotiations to do something more meaningful on transportation funding during this year's legislative session.

"There's a willingness on the Democrats to commit long-term general fund money to this problem, and there's a willingness among many Republicans to do at least one of the fees that we've been discussing, which is something dealing with electric vehicles," he said. "I have a little bit more of an optimistic outlook on this. I think more people own the problem more now than I've seen in the past."

So far, no bill dealing with long term transportation funding has been introduced into the Legislature.