

Report claims \$335M needed for highway construction

FRONT PAGE

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More money was needed for a highway construction project in southeast New Mexico as safety was the top concern, according to a Washington D.C. transportation research group.

An estimated \$335 million was needed to reconstruct nearly 60 miles of roadway along New Mexico State Road 128 and New Mexico State Road 31 from Eddy County to the Texas state line, read the study conducted by the National Transportation Research Project (TRIP).

According to the study, reconstruction with four driving lanes, alternating passing lanes, bridge replacements and intersection improvements were needed.

The New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT) proposed a design-build project for N.M. 31 which extends 22 miles from a junction from U.S. Highway 285 and U.S. Highway 62/180 in Eddy County, noted an NMDOT website dedicated to the project.

The N.M. 128 project would extend 60 miles from N.M. 31 through the Lea County community of Jal to the state line with Texas, according to NMDOT.

Rocky Moretti, TRIP director of policy and research, said southeast New Mexico as a whole would need \$945 million for various road projects.

Some southeast New Mexico legislators are working on a bill that would provide some funds for the 31 and 128 project, according to the New Mexico Legislature's website.

A report prepared by the New Mexico Legislature's Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) states existing pavement in several locations along the corridors in Chaves, Eddy and Lea counties were showing signs of distress and deterioration.

The report cites once pavement conditions fall below fair, deterioration increases rapidly and pavement surfaces could fail if action is not taken.

"Approximately 35 percent of the 84-mile U.S. 380 corridor and 30 percent of the New Mexico 31 and New Mexico 128 corridors have low pavement conditions that require reconstruction or major rehabilitation," according to LFC.

The bill received a do pass recommendation from a New Mexico House Committee. It awaits a hearing in the House Appropriations and Finance Committee as of Feb. 21 a hearing had not been scheduled, per the New Mexico Legislature's website.

New Mexico 128 and 31 was not the only project in southeast New Mexico needing money, Moretti said.

Nearly \$55 million was needed for pavement rehabilitation along nearly 70 miles of U.S. 62/180.

"Those are the type of needs in the rural parts of the state and certainly both of those projects have significant benefits in terms of safety and the overall condition of the system," he said.

Other aspects of TRIP report

The report found 34 percent of local and state-maintained roads in New Mexico are in poor condition and another 22 percent are in mediocre condition, costing the state's drivers a total of \$1.3 billion each year in extra vehicle operating costs, including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs, and increased fuel consumption and tire wear, according to a TRIP news release.

"New Mexico roads and bridges that are deteriorated, congested, or lack some desirable safety features cost the state's motorists a total of \$3 billion annually – as much as \$2,888 per driver in some areas - due to higher vehicle operating costs, traffic crashes and congestion-related delays," the release stated.

The report also noted that the efficiency and condition of New Mexico's transportation system was critical to the health of the state's economy. "Annually, \$125 billion in goods are shipped to and from New Mexico, relying heavily on the state's network of roads and bridges. The value of freight shipped to and from sites in New Mexico, in inflation-adjusted dollars, is expected to increase 59 percent by 2045," the report read.

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U.S. Senator Ben Ray Lujan addresses the joint session of the New Mexico House and Senate on Tuesday on the House Floor at the New Mexico State Capitol building. PHOTOS BY MEG POTTER/SUN NEWS

Sen. Lujan, Stansbury address lawmakers

SANTA FE

In an emotional return to the chamber where his father, Ben Lujan, Sr., served as Speaker for 12 years, U.S. Sen. Ben Ray Lujan, D-N.M., addressed a joint session of the New Mexico Legislature on Tuesday. "To be surrounded by friends and family — that's what this body is," Lujan said. He shared memories of growing up in Northern New Mexico and how his family instilled in him a sense of values and service. Lujan also spoke about the ways he has worked across the aisle to address the needs of New Mexicans during his time in the Senate.



U.S. Representative Melanie Stansbury hugs a colleague after addressing the joint session of the New Mexico House and Senate on Tuesday on the House Floor at the New Mexico State Capitol building.

"I'm not going to tell you how to do it," Lujan told legislators. "I trust you to do it — to do the right thing." U.S. Rep. Melanie Stansbury, D-N.M., a former member of the New Mexico House of Representatives, also addressed the lawmakers. She recognized the diversity in the Legislature, and noted that, as the daughter of a seamstress and single mom, "I know what it's like to struggle." Stansbury touted the New Mexico delegation's efforts to improve veteran benefits, more than \$1 billion in recent federal investments in the state, and a recently-passed bill to invest in New Mexico's STEM economy. She urged lawmakers to protect voting rights and noted the urgency of tackling drought and climate change.

"This is the moment to seize our destiny, to learn from our ancestors from every corner of our state. This is our moment," Stansbury said.

Feds offer more NM land to oil and gas industry amid new rules

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Public land in southeast New Mexico was proposed by the federal government for lease to the oil and gas industry in an auction expected by the end of the year.

The New Mexico branch of Bureau of Land Management's fourth quarter oil and gas lease sale included four parcels in Eddy County, two in Lea County and one in Roosevelt County, along with five in Oklahoma — two in Pittsburg County and three in Woods County.

The parcels totaled about 996 acres, the BLM reported. About 309.5 acres in Eddy County was offered in the sale, records show, along with 320 in Roosevelt and 124 in Lea County. The BLM opened a public scoping period to seek public input on the sale and lands proposed by the auction, continuing until March 20.

The sale would be the second of 2023 in New Mexico, under recently updated terms of the Inflation Reduction Act. Minimum bids were set at \$10 an acre.



An oil processing facility flares excess natural gas south of Carlsbad. DON LUSHER/SEARCHLIGHT NEW MEXICO



Traffic heads north along U.S. 285 in Artesia on Feb. 21, 2023. A recent study indicates that nearly \$945 million was needed to complete NMDOT projects in southeast New Mexico. Mike Smith Current-Argus

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NMDOT
THE NEW MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

\$5.75 BILLION NEEDED

UNFUNDED TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS

NMDOT HAS IDENTIFIED NEARLY \$5.75 BILLION IN NEEDED BUT UNFUNDED TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS THROUGHOUT THE STATE.

TRIP A National Transportation Research Nonprofit
WWW.TRIPNET.ORG

State Rep. Candy Spence Ezell (R-58), State Rep. Cathrynn Brown (R-55), State Rep. Greg Nibert (R-59), State Rep. Jimmy Mason (R-66) and State Rep. Jim Townsend (R-54) introduced House Bill (HB) 223 titled Projects on Certain Highways, during late January in the 2023 New Mexico Legislature. The bill sets up a \$650 million appropriation through NMDOT's Appropriation Contingency Fund for spending during a nearly two-year period for acquiring rights of way, planning, design and construction of projects along N.M. 128 and 31 and on U.S. Highway 380 near Roswell.