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# As lawmakers ready to move quickly on bonding bill, report finds NM road deficiencies have high cost

Dan Boyd, [Albuquerque Journal](#)

The combination of rising inflation-related costs and less revenue due to more fuel-efficient vehicles has made it a bumpy ride for New Mexico drivers in recent years. But state lawmakers are expected to take quick action during the 30-day legislative session that begins next week to pass a \$1.5 billion bonding bill that could help alleviate [a funding crunch](#) for road repairs and construction statewide.

The bonding bill, which would have also increased vehicle registration fees and imposed a new fee on electric vehicles, stalled in the Senate during the final days of last year's 60-day legislative session. But a new version of the bill could advance to Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's desk for final approval in the first two weeks of this year's session, said Senate Majority Leader Peter Wirth, D-Santa Fe.

"Given the fact that we've not raised the gas tax since (the 1990s), getting dollars into our roads is a huge, high priority," Wirth said in a recent interview.

He also said additional dollars for road projects will likely be allocated in a separate budget bill for the coming fiscal year that's also expected to be approved during the legislative session that starts Jan. 20.

The push for more road funding was bolstered Thursday by [a report from a national group](#) that found that driving on deficient roads costs New Mexico drivers about \$3.3 billion per year. That figure was calculated based on the estimated costs of vehicle repairs from driving on rough roads, wasted fuel due to traffic congestion and car crashes.

In addition, the report specifically pegged the cost for drivers in Albuquerque at \$3,061 per year, with slightly lower costs for drivers in Las Cruces and Santa Fe.

The report, released by TRIP, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit group, also found that more than half of the roads in both Albuquerque and Las Cruces are currently in poor or mediocre condition.

"Although the costs to drivers are already startlingly high and come at a time when many drivers can ill-afford it, they'll grow even higher in the future unless the state can provide additional funding to improve road and bridge conditions, ease congestion and enhance safety across the state," said Carolyn Bonifas Kelly, the director of communication and research for the group and an author of the report.

Meanwhile, the report also cited a current budget shortfall of \$7.5 billion to pay for road projects determined to be necessary by the New Mexico Department of Transportation. Top DOT officials last year said the agency faced a \$471.6 million gap in funding for priority projects around the state.

During a Thursday news conference, House Minority Leader Gail Armstrong, R-Magdalena, described road improvements as key to bolstering the state's economic development and public safety efforts.

## At a glance:

A report issued Thursday by a national group identified more than \$7.5 billion in needed but unfunded transportation projects across New Mexico. Here are some of the proposed projects:

- \$408 million — Add additional traffic lane on a 22-mile stretch of Interstate 25 between Bernalillo and Cochiti Pueblo.
- \$500 million — Improve pavement along Interstate 40 from Santa Rosa to the Texas state line.
- \$355 million — Rebuild U.S. Highway between Deming and Bayard to feature four lanes or an alternating passing lane.
- \$48 million — Reconstruct and improve Cerrillos Road in Santa Fe between St. Francis Drive and St. Michael's Drive.
- \$195 million — Widen U.S. Highway 64 between Taos and Tres Piedras to add shoulders.

"New Mexico is not a poor state," said Armstrong, who represents one of the state's largest legislative districts. "And we shouldn't act like one when it comes to DOT."

While \$65 million in state funds was allocated for road projects last year, critics said that amount of money was insufficient to keep up with necessary repairs statewide. A group of construction and maintenance workers [urged Lujan Grisham](#) to add road funding to the agenda of a special legislative session last fall, but the governor ultimately decided against doing so. Given that backdrop, Sen. George Muñoz, D-Gallup, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, pledged the \$1.5 billion bonding bill will move quickly during this year's session to the governor's desk.

"New Mexico is going to step to the plate and make sure that's taken care of," Muñoz said Thursday.

However, he also called on the state Department of Transportation to be more efficient when it comes to putting appropriated state dollars to work.

New Mexico's state road fund gets its money from several revenue sources, including the gas tax, vehicle registration fees and the vehicle excise tax levied on purchases.

The road fund, which is used to pay for repair and construction projects statewide, is projected to gradually increase to nearly \$600 million in 2030. But its value is then projected to decrease by 13% by 2050.

In large part, that's because of a projected increase in fuel efficiency — as measured in miles per gallon of gasoline — in new vehicles.

That trend has reignited a debate in recent years over whether New Mexico should increase its 17-cent per gallon gas tax rate, which is the [lowest in the region](#). The state's gas tax rate was last adjusted in 1996.

Muñoz said he expects the issue to generate additional debate during this year's session, as a way to generate additional recurring revenue.

Meanwhile, the Governor's Office has thrown its support behind the planned funding infusion for road improvements, but has taken a wait-and-see approach on a possible gas tax hike.