

Report: Poor roads, bridges costing Mass. millions

By Steve LeBlanc, Associated Press Writer | June 22, 2008

BOSTON --More than a third of the state's roads are fair or poor condition, costing the average Massachusetts driver an estimated \$156 each year in repair costs, increased fuel consumption and tire wear.

That's one finding of a new report to be released Monday looking at the state's pothole-plagued roads, crumbling bridges and cash-strapped public transit systems.

The report was commissioned by a coalition of unions, business and civic groups who hope to renew a debate over the state's transportation needs -- and what they say are the new revenues needed to fix the problem.

Those revenues should include a hike in the state gas tax and expanded tolling beyond the Massachusetts Turnpike, some supporters of the report said.

"We have to really make a decision about whether or not we are going to endanger public safety and endanger our economic competitiveness or whether we are going to step up and put some more money into the system," said Marc Draisen, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council and a member of the coalition.

The study by the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group TRIP paints a sober picture of the states' roads, bridges and rails.

Massachusetts' highways are among the busiest in the nation, with traffic increasing 20 percent between 1990 and 2005 and expected to jump another 20 percent by 2025, the report said.

On average, Massachusetts roads see 66 percent more traffic than the national average, placing the state fifth in the nation for daily traffic volume on major roads behind New Jersey, Maryland, Connecticut and Hawaii.

All that wear and tear has taken a toll -- both on road conditions and driver's wallets, the report said.

Driving on roads in need of repairs in Massachusetts costs motorists an extra \$718 million a year. Poor road conditions can also lead to increased accidents and traffic deaths.

On average about 454 people die each year in car accidents in Massachusetts. Traffic accidents costs the state \$6.3 billion a year, or about \$988 for every resident in medical costs, lost productivity, insurance and legal costs.

Highway improvements, including rumble strips, wider lanes and better road markings could bring that number down. The Federal Highway Administration estimates every \$100 million spent on highway safety improvements results in 145 fewer traffic fatalities per decade.

The report also points to other well documented problems including the state's crumbling bridges and the MBTA's struggling finances.

Gov. Deval Patrick is pushing a plan to borrow nearly \$3 billion to speed repairs for 250 to 300 "structurally deficient" bridges and the MBTA has reported a steady increase in ridership as gas prices soar.

The formation of the coalition follows a report released last year by a blue ribbon transportation commission.

The commission said the state needs to raise an additional \$15 to \$19 billion to repair and maintain its existing transportation infrastructure over the next two decades and the best way to close the gap is by hiking the gas tax by 11.5-cents and creating a new 5-cent per mile highway "user fee" on state highways.

The gas tax hike alone could bring in an estimated \$10.5 billion over the next two decades.

The earlier report also called for key savings -- from paring back the pension and health benefits for MBTA employees to eliminating paid police details on road construction projects to barring the state from borrowing money to pay for operating expenses.

The call for new taxes and tolls met with resistance on Beacon Hill, where lawmakers were reluctant to add to the soaring price of gasoline.

Critics say that before the state can think about putting more of a financial burden on over-stressed drivers, it has to wring all the savings it can out of the system.

Those reforms include a proposal by Gov. Deval Patrick and legislative leaders to replace some police traffic details with civilian flag bearers.

"They shouldn't even talk about new revenues until they do the reforms first," said Barbara Anderson of the anti-tax group Citizens for Limited Taxation. "They simply have a lot of nerve talking about a tax increase. They have to show where the last gas tax increase went first."

But Draisen said the state can't dig itself out of the transportation funding hole with reforms alone.

"Even if we did all (the reforms) we would still need to raise additional funds and that means taxes, tolls or both," he said. ■