

Report: Ga. faces \$51 billion road building shortfall over 30 years

By Shannon McCaffrey - Associated Press

ATLANTA - A national transportation research group provided ammunition to those looking to pour additional dollars into Georgia's highway construction as it released a report on Thursday saying that the state's roads are not keeping pace with its ballooning population.

The report from Washington, D.C.-based TRIP said Georgia faces a \$51 billion shortfall over the next 30 years to fund existing projects in the pipeline to build and repair roads and bridges. Advocates in the state say the shortfall is actually closer to \$200 billion. That tally includes the rising cost of road construction equipment and projects that are expected to be added to the state's list over the next three decades.

"Georgia is falling behind," Frank Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP, said at a news conference Thursday at the state Department of Transportation headquarters.

Moretti said that Georgia's growing population, especially in metro Atlanta, has led to worsening traffic congestion, which can stall the state's economic development.

Some have suggested that instead of concentrating on simply building and expanding roads, the state should also be investing in mass transportation which would cut back on traffic congestion.

The findings in Monday's report are hardly new. Officials have long lamented the Atlanta area's traffic woes.

But the report comes amid movement on several transportation fronts. Gov. Sonny Perdue is studying the recommendations of his transportation task force. Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle and House Speaker Glenn Richardson have promised a plan once they receive results of an audit of the state DOT that they requested. And a legislative study committee is looking at how to pay for road improvements.

"I hope that this is the year that we can bear down and all of us come together to find a solution to the problem," state Department of Transportation Chairman Mike Evans said.

Mike Kenn, president of Georgians for Better Transportation, said the time to act is now. A tax increase to fund transportation improvements must be approved by voters. That could only happen in even-numbered years. The chances of it happening in 2010, when there is a gubernatorial election, are slim. Kenn said 2008 is the best chance they have.

"We're in a downward spiral here and the conditions are only going to get worse," Kenn said.

The report found that Georgia will have \$62 billion in highway transportation funding through 2035. The state needs \$113 billion to complete road and bridge projects in that time frame.