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TRIP Report: Greater Investment Needed in Wyoming Highways

Wyoming needs increased investment in transportation improvements to meet the state's existing challenges and emerging changes, according to a report released Thursday by the nonprofit transportation research organization TRIP.

"With an unemployment rate that has more than doubled in the past year, and with the state's population continuing to grow, Wyoming must improve its system of roads, highways, bridges, and public transit to foster economic growth, keep business in the state, and ensure the safe, reliable mobility needed to improve the quality of life for all residents," the report contends.

About one-fourth of the state's major roads are in poor condition, according to TRIP. That statistic has risen steadily since 2000, when 15 percent of the state's roads were in poor condition. The proportion is expected to climb even higher. The Wyoming Department of Transportation estimates that 42 percent of state-maintained roads will be in poor condition by 2015 if current funding levels aren't increased.

The report also explains how state roads in need of repair cost each Wyoming driver a yearly average of \$230 in extra vehicle operating expenses -- a total of \$88 million statewide. Wyoming, the report further points out, also suffers from the eighth highest traffic fatality rate in the nation. In addition, 13 percent of the state's bridges are structurally deficient and another 9 percent are functionally obsolete.

"This report demonstrates that the critical needs for a safe and efficient transportation system are still ongoing and not going away regardless of the tight economic times in which we find ourselves," said Jonathan Downing, executive vice president of the Wyoming Contractors Association.

The report, "Future Mobility in Wyoming: Meeting the State's Need for Safe and Efficient Mobility," also identifies several key transportation projects that can't move forward without a substantial increase in funding. These projects include building a new bridge on the West Belt Loop over the North Platte River in Casper; performing 12 miles of pavement preservation work on Interstate 80 in Sweetwater County; reconstructing an Interstate 90 interchange in Sheridan; and erecting bus garages and transit facilities in Jackson, Rock Springs, and Laramie.

Also documented in the report is how these needs are made all the more urgent by the state's ongoing demographic trends. Wyoming, despite the current economic downturn, continues to experience growth on a couple of noteworthy fronts. Since 1990, the state's population has increased by 17 percent; vehicle travel increased by 56 percent; and gross domestic product, when adjusted for inflation, increased by 63 percent. All of this has resulted in even bigger demands on Wyoming's highways.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has provided Wyoming with \$158 million for highways and bridges and \$9 million for mass transit. As the report makes clear, however, those amounts are still not enough to cover all top-priority transportation expenditures within the state.

"While the state has put a combination of federal and state funds to good use in the past, in the coming years, many additional needed projects will remain stranded on the drawing board because of insufficient funding," said Will Wilkins, executive director of TRIP. "It is critical that the state adequately fund its transportation system and that Congress produces a timely and adequately funded federal transportation program."

The 35-page report is available at tinyurl.com/TRIP-Wyoming.