

AZ roads, bridges are in good shape

By EMILIE EATON, Cronkite News

Arizona has some of the safest roads and bridges in the nation, according to a new analysis of Federal Highway Administration data, but experts worry that recent budget cuts could threaten state roads in the future.

The report, by USA Today and TRIP, a nonprofit transportation research group, said Arizona was sixth in the nation for the number of roads in good condition and tied for third-lowest number of structurally deficient bridges.

More than 57 percent of the state's roadways were in good condition and less than 3 percent of bridges were considered deficient in 2011, according to the highway administration data analyzed for the report.

Even as they welcomed the news, however, state transportation leaders worried about \$350 million in budget cuts that are scheduled over the next five years.

"We've been successful in maintaining our highways and bridges over the years," said Doug Nintzel, a spokesman for the Arizona Department of Transportation. "But like other states, we're concerned that current funding levels are not going to come close to meeting future needs."

Nintzel said the State Transportation Board ordered the budget cuts in June to cope with reductions in funding from the state and federal governments.

That has forced the board to focus on maintenance instead of expansion projects, Nintzel said, although some new construction has been approved. Those projects include a widening of Arizona 89, technology improvements on Interstate 10 near the Ehrenberg Port of Entry and other projects, but more are needed given Arizona's growing population, he said.

Nintzel said Arizona usually ranks low in congestion compared to other metropolitan areas, but that could change if construction does not keep pace with the population.

Growth in Arizona is "happening at a rate higher than the rest of the nation," said Frank Moretti, the director of policy and research at TRIP, which helped prepare the study.

Dealing with population growth and aging infrastructure in the face of budget cuts will be a significant problem for Arizona, Moretti said.

And Arizona is not alone. Tony Dorsey, a spokesman at the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, is worried that the Highway Trust Fund, a national fund that supports the interstate highway system across the country, is in trouble.

"We have been basically flat-lined for over 10 years," Dorsey said of the fund, which relies on a gas tax that has not been raised in years.

Tony Bradley, the executive director of the Arizona Trucking Association, agreed.

"There's less money going into that trust fund," Bradley said, adding that such low funding will only let Arizona maintain its roads and bridges. If the state is going to continue to improve, it needs to do more than maintenance, he said.

Bradley stressed the importance of coming up with a solution that addresses transportation funding for the long-term. Nintzel agreed. In order to address growing needs in Arizona, the state has turned to lawmakers at the state and national government levels for help, he said.

"We used to talk about funding needs as if there were storm clouds on the horizon," Nintzel said. "That storm cloud has arrived."