

TIMES-NEWS

Study: Idaho's Rural Roads in Poor Shape

Only Vermont's rural byways were rated in worse condition in a recent report.

FRONT PAGE

BY BEN BOTKIN

Idaho's rural road conditions lag behind most of the nation. A full 31 percent of Idaho's rural roads were rated in poor condition by a study recently released by TRIP, a nonpartisan national transportation research group.

That's the second-worst rate in the nation. The only state with worse rural road conditions is Vermont, at 36 percent.

The report recommends modernizing and increasing the safety features on roads, and says that improving funding is necessary to preserve and improve the nation's rural roadways. The study found that in 2009, 146 traffic fatalities in Idaho — more than half of the 226 deaths tied to vehicle accidents — were on rural roads.

Transportation officials and policymakers in the Magic Valley say that if more funding were available, it would aid road upkeep efforts. Under the state's existing system, rural highway districts, cities and counties all share 38 percent of Idaho's gas and diesel tax of 25 cents per gallon.

That funding has dropped somewhat, due at least in part to people traveling less in the recession. Fuel taxes — as well as registration fees — pulled in \$43.1 million for highway districts in fiscal 2011. That's down 6.5 percent from \$46.1 million in 2007, the highest amount since 2005.

State Rep. Leon Smith, R-Twin Falls and a member of the House Transportation and

Defense Committee, said the slim funding stream contributes to Idaho's low ranking in the study.

At the same time, he said, highway districts "do pretty well with the money that they have."

One advantage, if there is one for south-central Idaho, Smith said, is that there's no major rainy season to accelerate road deterioration. In northern Idaho, there's a bigger rainy season but no more money, he said.

Stuart Davis, executive director of the Idaho Association of Highway Districts, said it's been difficult over the years for transportation policymakers to sell the idea of a fuel tax increase, particularly as federal transportation money has drastically increased in recent years.

He says the state's existing model for a fuel tax is outdated, particularly as it's consumption-based and vehicles are increasingly efficient.

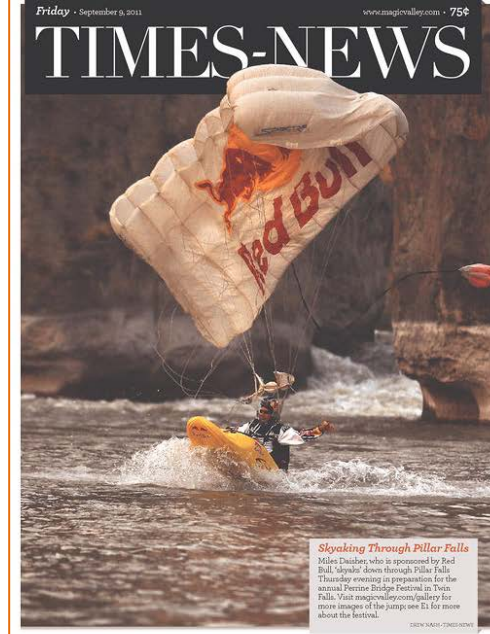
"In my opinion, we need to look at a combination of registration and fuel tax increases," he said, adding that it has to be incremental, but also would be hard to sell to the public in a recession.

The Twin Falls Highway District recently switched to repaving roads by grinding up old asphalt and turning it into a gravel base.

That saves money because fewer construction materials are needed and the asphalt doesn't need to be hauled away, said district Director Dave Jones.

It also increases the road base for more protection against wear and tear from heavy trucks, he said.

Karen Dalton, administrator of the district, said the district has been able to avoid layoffs with good money management. Unlike other districts in Idaho, it hasn't had to grind up paved roads into gravel roads because it can't afford repaving, she said.



State to Set Online Class Requirements Today

BY JULIE WOODTON
juliew@magicvalley.com

The state may soon give its stamp of approval to a proposed rule that would require high school students to take online classes in order to graduate.

The Idaho State Board of Education will hold a special meeting today to vote on the rule. The measure would still have to go before the Idaho Legislature during the 2012 session, which starts in January.

Under the proposal, students starting in the class of 2016 would have to take at least two online credits.

Scott Rogers, superintendent of the Minidoka County School District, said there are a lot of unanswered questions about the state's proposal.

The largest question on some superintendents' minds, he said, is how state funding for school districts could be affected if more students take classes online. School districts receive funding based on average daily student attendance rates.

"Schools have been ramping up for these changes," Rogers said. "We have set up all the details."

Melissa McGrath, spokeswoman for the Idaho State Department of Education, said online class initiatives should be cost-neutral or generate savings for most school districts.

"We're just changing the learning

Burley, Minico Grind It Out

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Bring Your Guitar to Open Mic Night

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Dump Truck Takes Out Power Lines in South T.F.

Idaho Power crews were to restore power in downtown Twin Falls Thursday afternoon. A dump truck collided with a power line, causing a local power outage for about 20 minutes.



Thursday's mishap caused a 20-minute power outage for 700 Idaho Power customers in downtown Twin Falls.

A construction work mishap led to the loss of power for more than 700 Idaho Power Co. customers in south Twin Falls Thursday afternoon.

According to Twin Falls Police Officer Luke Allen, a dump truck carrying gravel's straggled onto power lines at 1:40 p.m., when a crew was reassembling the Twin Falls Canal Co's equipment yard, at 400 Sixth St. W. Power poles were not pulled down, only the wires were damaged.

Because of the incident, 710 customers in the downtown area were without power for about an hour, according to Idaho Power spokesman Kevin Winslow. Service had been restored for all but 23 customers shortly after 2:30 p.m.

No one was injured in the accident, so emergency response was limited to a few patrol officers and one fire engine. Other officers and city workers were dispatched for traffic control, as some downtown traffic signals went dark.

Note Pappano contributed to this report.

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Photo by BOBBI Mc

'Pass This Jobs Bill'

Attacking a deepening crisis on Capitol Hill, President Barack Obama Wednesday urged Congress Thursday night to urgently pass a larger-than-expected \$420-billion plan to jump-start the economy that has stalled.

What he proposed: In announcing a plan to lay out tax cuts that he hoped would win over opponents, Obama sought to offer a package that could get through a deeply divided Congress, speed hiring in a nation where 14 million are out of work and show up public assistance in his leadership.

What it would cost: The White House put the price tag of Obama's plan at \$420 billion, with about \$252 billion in tax cuts and \$168 billion in federal spending. As to getting for it, Obama will add a special debt panel in Congress to find enough savings to cover the cost of his ideas.

Left unmade: Obama didn't outline how many jobs would be created by his plan, or how to reduce federal spending for construction, hiring and an extension of aid to borrowers for the long-term unemployed. He says he'll release specifics a week from Monday with a proposal to stabilize long-term debt.

Read more on N1.

At a Glance Rural Roads

Four worst states for percentage of roads in poor condition:

1. Vermont, 36 percent
2. Idaho, 31 percent
3. Oklahoma, 30 percent
4. Rhode Island, 30 percent

Four best states for percentage of roads in poor condition:

1. Kentucky, 1 percent
2. Nevada and North Carolina (tie), 2 percent
3. Tennessee, Ohio and Florida (tie), 3 percent
4. Montana, 4 percent

Source: Study of rural roads by TRIP (The Road Information Program).