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EDITORIAL

LEGISLATOR: BRIDGE AND ROAD SAFETY BILL WILL FIX PROBLEM

By FRANK GARNER

I've spent three decades involved in improving public safety. The people that know me recognize it remains one of the great passions in my life. It's that passion that has driven me in my life as a police officer, as a community volunteer and in my role in our Legislature.

It is why after seeing the information in a recent TRIP report, I recognized we have to change the rate at which we are funding road and bridge work in this state. The TRIP report is an independent study commissioned by the Infrastructure Coalition that paints a grim picture of the state of our road and bridge infrastructure. Founded in 1971, TRIP is a private nonprofit organization that researches, evaluates and distributes economic and technical data on surface transportation issues.

To that end I've worked across the state and across the aisle to craft a long-term solution and that's why I am proposing the Bridge and Road Safety and Accountability Act. The act requires an audit of the Department of Transportation, a raise in the gas tax and a web site to report all expenditures and projects.

According to the independent Trip Report, Montana is third in the nation for fatalities per miles driven, there are over 400 bridges structurally deficient and over 500 that are structurally obsolete. Fully

34 percent of Montana's major roads are in poor condition.

We haven't raised the gas tax in nearly a quarter of a century, and in the meantime fuel efficiency has resulted in us paying much less per mile towards our repairs. It costs Montanans over \$800 million a year in unfunded improvements and repairs and about the same in damage to vehicles and delays due to poor roads.

Over 20 Highway Patrol troopers are at risk of losing their jobs as a result of a loss of highway funding.

This bill offers three primary policies and promotes solutions intended to guarantee the money will be spent on road and bridge work. The three main policy areas are:

- **Efficiency** — Requiring an independent audit of the Montana Department of Transportation. It's an effort to compare our costs and expenses with similar departments in other states to make sure we are being as efficient as possible.
- **Revenues** — Authorizing an increase in the gas tax of 8 cents and an increase of 7.25 cents in highway diesel. It does not include an increase in off-road diesel. It raises about \$35 million to help the state capture \$220 million in federal match dollars, about \$22 million for counties and cities to work on bridges and roads and about \$2.5 million a year for the Highway

Patrol to avoid losing several officers due to budget cuts. Visitors will help pay this every time they fill up and all of the local dollars will be competitively bid. It requires these funds be spent on road and bridge work.

- **Accountability** — Establishing a web page to allow anyone to see the projects being funded and every dollar raised and spent.

We can pay as we go for these improvements and we can get our out-of-state visitors to help us pay for them. We can turn an investment of \$60 million into \$290 million with federal and local matching funds and we can save tens of millions more with safer and better roads.

We can continue to sit by and watch as the gap between what we pay and what we spend on road and bridge safety becomes ever wider, or we can ask those that use them to help close that gap for what will amount to the cost of a latte or about \$5 a month for most drivers.

I could ignore this, but it wouldn't fix the problem and I believe it's the right thing to do. The mission for me is road and bridge safety for our families, and that's why I'm sponsoring the Bridge and Road Safety and Accountability Act.

Frank Garner, a Kalispell Republican, represents House District 7 in Helena.