

West Virginia faces transportation funding shortfall

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More than one-third of West Virginia's roads are in poor or mediocre condition, 37 percent of the state's bridges are deficient, and its traffic fatality rate is the third highest in the nation. And according to a new report entitled "Future Mobility in West Virginia: Meeting the State's Need for Safe and Efficient Mobility," the state faces a transportation funding shortfall of \$5 billion over the next 10 years. Unless West Virginia can address this funding gap, many sorely needed transportation projects will remain unfunded.

According to TRIP, a Washington, D.C., based nonprofit organization that researches, evaluates and distributes information on highway transportation issues, 8 percent of West Virginia's roads are in poor condition and an additional 29 percent are in mediocre condition. Driving on roads in need of repair costs each West Virginia motorist an average of \$280 annually – \$371 million statewide – in the form of accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs and increased fuel consumption and tire wear. The report contains a list of needed roadway repair and reconstruction projects throughout the state that currently lack adequate funding to proceed.

Fifteen percent of the state's bridges (20 ft. or longer) are structurally deficient and another 22 percent are functionally obsolete. The TRIP report contains a list of the 25 bridges in the state with the lowest sufficiency rating, for which repairs are not scheduled through 2009.

"This report shows that West Virginia has enormous deficiencies in road and bridge funding," said Joe Deneault, chairman of West Virginians for Better Transportation. "The federal stimulus package will not make as big of an impact as we had hoped. And with a projected deficit of \$5 billion in surface transportation needs over the next 10 years, we believe it is critically important for the governor, legislature and Department of Transportation to come together and develop a long-term funding solution for our roads, bridges and highways."

The report found that West Virginia's traffic fatality rate of 2.10 fatalities per 100 million miles of travel is the third highest in the United States and 54 percent higher than the national average.

The West Virginia Department of Transportation projects a transportation funding shortfall of nearly \$5 billion from 2009 to 2018. The department estimates that \$9.75 billion will be needed through 2018 to improve road and bridge conditions, enhance economic development, provide needed safety measures and relieve traffic congestion. However, the state estimates that only \$5 billion will be available during that time.

In addition to the \$4.2 billion that West Virginia received from 1998 to 2008 in federal funding for road, highway, bridge and public transit improvements, the state recently received about \$211 million in federal stimulus funding for highway and bridge improvements

and \$19 million for public transit improvements. This funding can serve as a down payment on needed road, highway, bridge and transit improvements, but it is not sufficient to allow the state to proceed with numerous projects needed to modernize its surface transportation system.

The current federal transportation program, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act – A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), expires on Sept. 30, requiring Congress to authorize a new federal surface transportation program or extend the current program to allow federal highway dollars to continue to be provided to West Virginia. Recent declines in federal surface transportation revenues, as well as significant increases in the cost of transportation construction materials, will make it more difficult for Congress to authorize new, adequately funded federal surface transportation legislation.

"West Virginia has benefited tremendously from the federal transportation program," said William M. Wilkins, executive director of TRIP. "While the state has put this combination of federal and state funds to good use in the past, in the coming years, many additional needed projects will remain on the drawing board because of insufficient funding. It is critical that the state adequately funds its transportation system and that Congress produces a timely and adequately funded federal surface transportation program this year."