Showdown over Highway Trust Fund raising states’ concerns

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BLUEFIELD — Chalk up rural roads as another national category that West Virginia has earned a low ranking among the 50 U.S. states. According to a survey by TRIP, a National Transportation Research Group, the Mountain State ranks third behind Connecticut and Rhode Island with 33 percent of its rural roads in poor condition.

West Virginia does a little better in the percentage of deficient rural bridges with only 13 percent, putting the state in 19th place, where No. 1, is Pennsylvania with 25 percent deficient. However, West Virginia is third behind South Carolina and Florida in “Fatality rate rural/all other roads, according to the TRIP study.

“A modern, well-maintained West Virginia transportation system is of vital importance to the state’s economy, particularly in helping to preserve the jobs of so many industries and drive new opportunities,” Carol Fulks, chair of West Virginians for Better Transportation was quoted in a press release as stating. She added that the state needs “long-term funding plans,” using state and federal funds “To address the current problems and to meet future expansion projects.”

State Delegate Marty Gearheart, R-Mercer, said that Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin established a Blue Ribbon Commission of Highways in early 2012, but he said that while the final report was due in February 2013, but later delayed until May 2013, “the commission has never been issued to the governor. It seems we have either lost focus on this or the results of the commission were undesirable.”

Marc Meachum, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce is one of only two southern West Virginians on the commission. He said that the group has not met since 2013 when commissioners gave Tomblin a draft report.

“It is in the governor’s hands,” Meachum said. “He didn’t mention it in the state of the state address. Of course, as southern West Virginians, myself and Wally Thornhill of Chapmanville supported completion of the King Coal Highway and the Coalfield Expressway, but we haven’t heard anything since submitting the draft report.”

Christopher Stadelman, a spokesperson for the commission said he expects the final report will be in Tomblin’s hands in the near future.

“The (commission’s) report is still in draft format, but will be finalized very soon and submitted to Gov. Tomblin for consideration,” Stadelman wrote in response to an email message seeking comment. He shared his response with Shayna S. Varner, Tomblin’s deputy press secretary.

“In the meantime, Gov. Tomblin and officials from the West Virginia Department of Transportation continue to repair existing roads and construct new ones.”

On July 7, Tomblin and four fellow governors, Mary Fallin of Oklahoma, Robert Bentley of Alabama and John Hickenlooper of Colorado — all officers in the National Governors Association — sent a letter to the Democratic and Republican party leaders of the senate and house — Senators Henry Reid and Mitch McConnell and Reps. Nancy Pelosi and John Boehner, urging them to resolve the federal Highway Trust Fund shortfall “without delay,” according to the letter.

“The looming HTF insolvency and the expiration of federal surface transportation laws and programs on Sept. 30, create uncertainty and threaten jobs across the country,” the governors wrote. “Strengthening our nation’s infrastructure is critically important for governors because infrastructure is a fundamental ingredient to advance economic growth and global competitiveness, create jobs and improve the quality of life.”

The governors pointed out clearly that: “Delaying congressional action until the HTF runs dry will not change the fact that those bills (that cover the federal share of completed work) must still be paid by the states.”

The governors wrote that they need “a reliable federal partner” to fix and fund surface transportation projects. “The time is now to settle these issues and prevent avoidable uncertainty.”

According to the TRIP survey, the loss of federal funds could cost West Virginia $470 million for highway and transit improvements if a lack of adequate revenue into the federal Highway Trust Fund is not addressed by congress,” according to the TRIP report.

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