Failure to fix rural roads costing lives

With a Senate filibuster on abortion threatening to further delay South Carolina lawmakers in approving a plan to fix the state’s roads and bridges, the pressure for action on infrastructure grows from business leaders. And if there is not already enough statistical and anecdotal evidence showing the need for improvements, a new study out Tuesday makes clear the danger motorists face in the state.

Business leaders gathered at the Statehouse Tuesday in conjunction with the S.C. Alliance to Fix Our Roads to rally support for the infrastructure funding that faces delay by a filibuster by Republican Sen. Lee Bright, who says he is not backing down from opposition to a compromise on a bill banning abortion past 19 weeks because it would allow exceptions for victims of rape and incest.

Already, the roads/bridges legislation faces an uphill battle. If the Senate approves a bill, it will have to be reconciled with a House-approved plan. And then there is the matter of Gov. Nikki Haley’s promised veto if any increase in the gas tax to fund road and bridge repairs is not offset by a corresponding decrease in the state income tax.

As the focus was on Columbia and the Legislature, the national non-profit group TRIP was in Washington releasing results of a study that shows the need for road repairs extends well beyond the main highways of the state – and that lives are a stake.

The TRIP report found traffic crashes and fatalities on rural roads in South Carolina are significantly higher than all other roads in the state. In 2013, non-interstate rural roads in South Carolina had a traffic fatality rate of 3.40 deaths for every 100 million vehicle miles of travel, the second-highest rate nationally and nearly five times higher than the traffic fatality rate of 0.69 deaths per 100 million VMT for all other roads in South Carolina.

The report also found that rural bridges in South Carolina have significant deficiencies. In 2014, 12 percent of South Carolina’s rural bridges were rated as structurally deficient, the 19th highest rate in the nation.

In the state’s Secondary (Rural) Roadway System that is federal-aid eligible, 31 percent of roads were rated poor and only 19 percent were in good condition in 2008. That lapsed to 43 percent poor and 20 percent good in 2013, according to Eric Dickey, chairman of the South Carolina Alliance to Fix Our Roads.

“This is compounded by our Secondary (Rural) Roadway System that is non-federal-aid eligible with 33 percent poor and only 14 percent good in 2008 – and lapsed to 50 percent poor and 10 percent good in 2013. While South Carolina struggles to maintain its interstate and primary roadway systems, the rural roadways are neglected and continue to deteriorate,” Dickey said.

The report reinforces the need for action now. Major roads in developed counties are sure to get priority under any South Carolina road plan. And even those improvements will take years. More and more time will elapse before roads in rural and less-developed counties such as Orangeburg, Calhoun and Bamberg will see significant improvements. And that means a state with among the nation’s deadliest roads already could see the toll in lives get higher, with poor highway and bridge conditions increasingly being a factor.

Will Wilkins, executive director of TRIP, speaks for residents of rural counties: “The safety and quality of life in America’s small communities and rural areas and the health of the nation’s economy ride on our rural transportation system. The nation’s rural roads provide crucial links from farm to market, move manufactured and energy products, and provide access to countless tourism, social and recreational destinations.”

While we’ll echo him in calling on national leaders to break the gridlock and advance transportation legislation on the national level, the most immediate concern is seeing that state leaders in Columbia take action – and do so before the legislative session ends in less than a month.