EDITORIAL

Foon Rhee: Bad roads cost motorists, but are we willing to pay for fixes?

HIGHLIGHTS

- California metro areas dominate rankings of where poor road conditions cost motorists the most
- Study could help highway lobbyists in special session of Legislature on transportation funding
- Do legislators dare increase gas tax or vehicle fee?

It isn’t just your imagination, or the typical griping from commuters. The roads around California really are in terrible shape.

If you believe a new study, it’s a wonder we and our cars make it home in one piece despite all the potholes and crumbling concrete.

Since highways are also about money – how much is needed for fixes, who gets the contracts and who pays the bill – the analysis helpfully puts a dollar figure on how much bad roads cost motorists.

Among metropolitan areas with at least 500,000 people, seven in California rank among the 25 nationally where residents pay the most in additional costs caused by poor road conditions – more frequent maintenance, faster vehicle depreciation and higher gas consumption.

Motorists in San Francisco-Oakland and Los Angeles-Long Beach get hit the hardest, more than $1,000 a year. Sacramento is 20th at $767 a year, compared to the national average of $516. These added costs, the study says, total $109 billion a year nationally.

In the 250,000-500,000 population category, eight California metros rank in the worst 25, according to the study by TRIP, a research outfit in Washington, D.C., that is supported by insurers, engineering companies, labor unions and others with an interest in more road construction.

Stockton is 18th worst at $657; Modesto is right behind at $636.

In terms of the percentage of urban roads in substandard condition, California metro areas also dominate the worst-of rankings. Among the largest metros, San Francisco-Oakland, at 74 percent, and Los Angeles, at 73 percent, again top the list. Sacramento comes in at No. 24 at 42 percent, far higher than the national average of 28 percent.

It’s a safe bet that Caltrans and the highway construction lobby will try to make hay from the study when legislators return to the Capitol later this month for a special session called by Gov. Jerry Brown.

Lobbying groups for California cities and counties immediately trumpeted the analysis with a joint news release. On Monday, a coalition of local government, labor, business and transportation groups plan to unveil what they call “seven common sense and accountable recommendations” that should be included in any funding package to whittle down the huge backlog in road maintenance – an estimated $78 billion for local streets and roads, plus $59 billion for state highways.

With an annual funding shortfall of $7.8 billion for local roads and $5.7 billion for state highways, the longer repairs are put off, the bigger the price tag will get.

But fixing California’s decrepit roads could very well take raising the gas tax – already one of the nation’s highest – or increasing the dreaded vehicle license fee. You might say it’s like the famous punch line from those 1970s Fram oil filter TV ads: “You can pay me now, or you can pay me later.”

The big question is whether legislators will listen more to commuters who want a smoother ride – or to voters who would be angry if their taxes or fees go up.

BY THE NUMBERS

Where California metro areas rank in how much motorists pay a year in additional vehicle maintenance due to bad roads:

- 1. San Francisco-Oakland, $1,044
- 2. Los Angeles-Long Beach, $1,031
- 3. Concord, $954
- 8. San Jose, $844
- 9. San Diego, $843
- 12. Riverside-San Bernardino, $812
- 20. Sacramento, $767

Source: TRIP