

## OPINION

# Our Say: Government overspent while neglecting roads

A State Highway Administration spokesman noted that his agency wrestles every year with underfunding and there was nothing new about a report on Maryland roads released Tuesday by a national transportation research group.

He's right. The idea that Maryland's roads are congested and in poor condition is no news to those who drive daily. It's also not news to anyone who has had a recent opportunity to compare America's major roads with those in, say, Western Europe.

The Road Information Program reported that "in 2008, 26 percent of Maryland's roads were rated in poor condition and 18 percent were rated in mediocre condition." In the Baltimore area, 46 percent of major roads were in poor condition and 23 percent in mediocre condition, costing the average motorist \$603 a year in repairs. In the Washington, D.C., metro area, 31 percent of the roads were in poor condition and 29 percent in mediocre condition, costing drivers an average of \$462 a year.

In 2010, 7 percent of the state's bridges were structurally deficient - showing significant deterioration of

major components - and 18 percent were functionally obsolete.

Altogether, TRIP estimates that "insufficient roads cost Maryland's drivers a total of \$7 billion every year in the form of traffic crashes, additional vehicle operating costs ... and congestion-related delays."

The report is obviously going to be used as ammunition when state officials lobby on Capitol Hill, where a six-year transportation funding bill is stalled in Congress.

It also has relevance in Annapolis, where the governor is planning to shift more than \$400 million away from highway revenues and into the operating budget, stripping local governments of money they would have used for road repairs. Anne Arundel County's state aid for roads would go from more than \$30 million in 2007 to less than \$1 million in 2012.

The state Senate's majority leader, Sen. Robert Garagiola of Montgomery County, plans to introduce bills to provide about \$400 million annually to the state transportation trust fund through an 8-to-12-cent increase in the state gas tax - 23.5 cents a gallon since 1992 - and increasing vehicle

registration fees as much as 50 percent.

Garagiola knows that his only slim chance of selling something like this, particularly when gas prices are expected to be going up sharply, is to promise that it will be set up so that a hard-up governor can't grab the revenue for the general fund. But is there such a thing as a lockbox a desperate governor can't shatter?

In addition to rubbing the nose of Maryland drivers in a reality that's apparent beyond their windshields, the TRIP report - like similar documents - raises an important question: How on earth did we drive government on all levels into a fiscal hole while shortchanging basic infrastructure?

There is no infrastructure more basic, and more economically important, than roads. A government that let them deteriorate - while still managing to overspend - won't be remembered for prudence.