

# States seek options for highway, bridge funding



AP Photo/Molly Riles

A banner hangs on an overpass on Interstate 395 advertising the new I-95 Express Lanes in Alexandria, Va., in December as legislatures convene across the country, lawmakers and governors are grasping for ways to address an aging network of roads, highways and bridges during an era in which federal money for such projects has remained stagnant or declined. In Virginia, the new I-95 express lanes were funded in part by private investors who have a long-term contract to collect tolls.

The AP and Associated Press Media Editors are beginning a yearlong collaborative project about infrastructure needs throughout the country. The first of these stories focuses on the declining level of federal funding for highway and bridge projects. Governors and legislatures around the country are scrambling for alternatives as the federal share fails to keep pace with current and anticipated needs.

By DAVID A. LIEB  
The Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — Frustrated over stagnant or declining federal highway funding, state officials are accelerating their drive for new taxes, tolls and fees to repair an aging road system whose historical reliance on fuel taxes no longer is providing enough money to cover its costs.

Figures compiled by The Associated Press show the total amount of money available to states from the Federal Highway Trust Fund has declined 3.5 percent during the five-year period ending in 2013, the latest year for which numbers were available. During that span, the amount of inflation-adjusted federal highway money dropped in all but two states.

The shortfall has led to rougher roads requiring more frequent, short-term repairs, suspect bridges and jammed commuter routes that simply have more vehicle than the roads were designed to carry.

In response, states are devising ways to fill the gap. Transportation funding increases could be on the agenda in as many as one-third of the state legislatures this year. That comes after roughly one-fourth of the states increased transportation taxes or fees during the past two years.

The state proposals stand in stark contrast to the inaction in Congress, where a temporary funding patch is scheduled to expire in May and lawmakers have been at odds over a long-term highway plan.

“You’re seeing states all across the country that are looking to do something, because they realize you can’t count on the federal government,” said Missouri state Rep. Dave Hinson, a Republican who supports the idea of raising the state sales



AP Photo/Elaine Thompson

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, at podium, with Transportation Secretary Lynn Peterson and construction workers, speaks from the construction site of a new floating bridge on Lake Washington in Medina, Wash., Dec. 16.



America's crumbling infrastructure

tax for road improvements.

The annual amount available to states from the Federal Highway Trust Fund has hovered around \$40 billion since 2007. Even though total state and federal road funding exceeded the general rate of inflation over the past decade, the pace has tapered off in recent years as the amount coming from the federal government declined.

Roads, highways and their bridges form the basic framework of everyday life in America. They provide the crucial underpinning of daily commutes, the trucking industry’s transfer of food, computers and other goods from seaports to suburban strip malls, and summertime trips to beach towns and mountain getaways. They also are generally an afterthought until they no longer are up to the task.

Governors, lawmakers, local elected officials and engineers across the country say that is where the country has arrived, with a decades-old highway infrastructure that is not receiving enough money to match its needs.

“A lot of those facilities are in need of really massive rehab,



AP Photo/Mark Duncan

Traffic rolls on the Ohio Turnpike in Strongsville, Ohio, in September 2011. Entering into public-private partnerships, selling advertising sponsorships at highway rest areas and collecting additional fees for distracted driving are among the creative ways Ohio Gov. John Kasich’s administration is working to boost transportation revenue amid lagging federal outlays.

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almost reconstruction from the ground up,” said Jim Tyman, director of policy of at the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

The association estimates

that annual road and bridge spending by all levels of government is falling \$32 billion short of what is needed.

About 20 percent of the nation’s 900,000 miles of interstates and major roads are in need of resurfacing or reconstruction, and a quarter of its 600,000 bridges are rated as structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, according to federal data analyzed by the American Road & Transportation Builders Association.

The flat federal funding is having an impact because states rely on federal dollars for an average of about half their capital expenses for roads and bridges, according to the association. The rest is covered with state money, which comes predominantly from fuel taxes.

Gasoline tax revenue has grown little since 2007, as vehicles have become more fuel-efficient and people cut back on driving.

To compensate, lawmakers in Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Wyoming passed gasoline tax increases during the past two years.

But about half the states have

## Oregon has plans but not enough money for highway projects

By JEFF BARNARD  
The Associated Press

GRANTS PASS — Oregon has a plan for retrofitting the hundreds of bridges that are likely to fail in a major earthquake or are getting too old to support heavy trucks.

It just doesn’t have a way to pay for it all, and prospects for finding a solution are dim.

The federal gas tax hasn’t been raised in 21 years, and Oregon’s share has been declining for years.

The state gas tax, a major funding source for transportation infrastructure projects, hasn’t generated enough to repair the state’s roads and bridges as cars have gotten better mileage or quit using gas at all, and a new system of charging motorists by the mile rather than the gallon is still in the experimental stage.

Leaders in the Oregon Legislature agree something must be done, but there is strong disagreement over how.

The result has been that while per capita state and federal highway funding in Oregon was up 16 percent from 2003-2008, it dropped 11 percent from 2008-2013, according to figures reviewed by The Associated Press.

“We’re looking at a pretty big cliff” with no serious discussions in sight, Oregon Rep. Peter DeFazio, top Democrat on the U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said of the funding picture.

Earthquakes were not considered a major threat in Oregon until the 1980s, and bridges built before that weren’t designed to withstand them. Scientists think the region is due for a massive quake, and officials want to make safety

improvements to get ready.

“Areas of the state will be cut off for years by highway,” said Oregon Department of Transportation Assistant Director for Communications Travis Brouwer. “You’ll be relying on helicopters.”

The Oregon Highways Seismic Plus Report issued last October calls for replacing 138 bridges, and retrofitting 580 over the next 50 years in four phases at an overall cost of \$5 billion. Phase one focuses on U.S. Highway 97 on the east side of the Cascades, Interstate 5 through the Willamette Valley, and two routes connecting them.

Even without the threat of earthquake, 900 of Oregon’s 2,700 bridges need fixing in the next 20 years, but the projected cost is \$230 million a year, nearly five times the \$50 million available, Brouwer added. Without more money, by 2035 about 350 will have weight restrictions.

Paying for road work the usual way, through increases in the gas tax and DMV fees, has raised strong objections from Republicans, unless Democrats drop plans for legislation to combat greenhouse gases with a low-carbon fuel standard, which has passed the Senate.

That low-carbon fuel standard is likely to raise gas prices, making it very difficult to ask Oregonians to pay even more to raise money to fix roads and bridges, said Rep. Cliff Bentz, an Ontario Republican.

Meanwhile, another pilot program to demonstrate the workability of a pay-by-the-mile tax applying to high-mileage vehicles that don’t pay their share via the gas tax kicks off July 1, with 5,000 volunteers. An earlier attempt based on GPS trackers was scrapped over privacy complaints.



AP Photo/The Medford Mail Tribune/Jamie Lusch, File

This viaduct carries Interstate 5 traffic for more than a half mile over Bear Creek and city streets in Medford. The Oregon Department of Transportation has hired an engineering firm to consider how to fix the aging structure to withstand a major earthquake. Oregon has a plan for retrofitting the hundreds of bridges that are likely to fail in a major earthquake, or are getting too old to support heavy trucks. But current funding sources fall far short of what is needed.

not raised their gasoline taxes in at least a decade, and the federal gas tax has remained at 18.4 cents a gallon since 1993. In Congress, Republican leaders have said there aren’t enough votes to pass a gas tax hike.

Many states are now considering alternatives.

Virginia recently scrapped its per-gallon gasoline tax in favor of a new tax on the wholesale price of gas and a higher tax on other retail sales. The state also has turned to public-private partnerships, including a new \$925 million express-lane project on Interstate 95 that was financed

partly by private investors who have a long-term contract to collect tolls.

Lawmakers in Minnesota, Utah and Missouri also are expected to consider proposals this year that could levy a sales tax on fuel, allowing the states to reap more money when the price of gasoline rises. And Michigan voters will decide in May on a 1 percent general sales tax for transportation.

*Fractured Framework is a national reporting project between The Associated Press and APME, the Associated Press Media Editors association.*



AP Photo/Elaine Thompson

Work continues on the new Highway 520 floating bridge across Lake Washington as traffic moves along the adjacent, existing four-lane bridge between Medina, Wash., and Seattle, in the distance, Dec. 16. Washington has imposed fees on owners of electric vehicles, and Gov. Jay Inslee recently proposed a carbon-emissions tax on the state’s largest polluters that would help finance transportation projects. He describes it as “transportation pollution paying for transportation solutions.”