

Crumbling roads, bridges bring higher taxes, fees

By DAVID A. LIEB
Associated Press

For the first time in nearly 30 years, Tennessee will soon tax motorists more to fill their tanks. So will California, Indiana and Montana.

Lawmakers across the U.S. have approved new proposals this year to pay for transportation improvements, including tax hikes, vehicle fee increases and bond packages. Those measures extended an existing trend to a new milestone: Two-thirds of all states have stepped up highway funding over the past five years.

It's happening in both Democratic- and Republican-led states as their transportation departments strain to overcome backlogs deepened by the last recession. And lawmakers are acting regardless of promises from President Donald Trump for a \$1 trillion national infrastructure program that his administration has yet to detail.

Some state officials doubt that Trump's plan will make much of a difference when it comes to repairing and replacing thousands of old bridges or repaving and widening countless miles of congested roads.

"We really don't know what's in it. We haven't seen anything," said Tennessee state Rep. Eddie Smith, a Republican from Knoxville. But "it sounded like there wasn't going to be a lot that we would directly benefit from."

Trump has said his plan will depend partly on spurring private investment in infrastructure. That could include tax incentives for those who subsidize big-ticket projects, with an expectation that investors could recoup costs through tolls or fares on roads, bridges, rail systems or airports. Tennessee currently uses neither tolls nor bonds for its highway system.

Two dozen states

At least two dozen states adopted higher fuel or sales taxes to pay for transportation improvements.

"That's highly unusual for that many states to be in agreement about raising taxes, and these are oftentimes fairly conservative states as well," said Carl Davis, research director at the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, a Washington-based nonprofit think tank.

The U.S. has an \$836 billion backlog of needed repairs and improvements to roads and bridges, plus an additional \$90 billion backlog for public transit systems, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

Those needs have grown as the money available from the Federal Highway Trust Fund for states fell by more than 9 percent from 2010 to 2015, according to an Associated Press analysis of the most recent figures from the highway administration.

A 2015 federal law increases Highway Trust Fund money for states by \$20 billion over five years through traditional matching funds and new competitive grants. But some financial analysts project that will merely hold funding flat when accounting for inflation. States are "bellying up to



Officials look over the scene at Interstate 15 in the Cajon Pass, Calif., where part of the freeway collapsed due to heavy rain in February. David Pardo/The Daily Press

RECENT HIGHWAY FUNDING PLANS PASSED IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST, WEST COAST

CALIFORNIA

2017: Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown signs a law projected to raise \$52.4 billion over 10 years for roads, bridges, public transit and biking and walking trails. Gasoline taxes will rise by 12 cents per gallon in November and by 19.5 cents by 2020. Diesel taxes will rise by a total of 20 cents per gallon, and diesel sales taxes by 4 percent.

IDAHO

2014: Republican Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter signs a law redirecting part of the state's cigarette tax revenues to repaying highway bonds and addressing part of an estimated \$262 million annual backlog in road maintenance. The transfer was projected to be about \$13 million in 2017.

2015: Otter signs a law raising the fuel tax by 7 cents a gallon and vehicle registration fees by \$21. It's projected to generate \$95 million annually for transportation. The new law also allows a percentage of the year-end surplus in the state's general fund to be used for transportation.

2017: Otter allows legislation to become law without his signature authorizing about \$300 million in bonds for roads to be repaid with future federal money. It also redirects 1 percent of sales tax revenues from the general revenue to roads, raising about \$15 million annually.

WASHINGTON

2015: Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee signs a law raising the fuel tax by 11.9 cents a gallon over two years. The new law also authorizes additional bonding and raises various fees, including on vehicle registrations. The package is projected to generate \$16 billion over 16 years for state and local roads, transit and bike and pedestrian routes. It also lets local voters increase taxes for public transit.

the bar and actually increasing their own gas taxes to make up for the lack of an increase of federal spending," said Julius Vizner, an assistant vice president at Moody's Investors Service.

Republican-led South Carolina, which has long resisted tax increases, is among those seriously considering a gas tax hike this year. Separate tax proposals have passed the House and Senate, even though Republican Gov. Henry McMaster has threatened a veto and wrote a letter to Trump in February asking for \$5 billion in federal funding for infrastructure.

South Carolina House

Majority Leader Gary Simrill said the federal money would be welcome but doesn't provide a long-term solution. The state's Department of Transportation wants an additional \$1.1 billion annually over the next 25 years to improve roads.

"People who are waiting on the federal government usually just get old and tired," said Simrill, a Republican who has led the House's road-funding efforts for several years. "South Carolina cannot wait on the federal government to take care of our problem."

Federal tax

The federal gasoline tax has



Crews look over a tractor trailer and a San Bernardino County Fire Department fire engine that fell from southbound Interstate 15 where part of the freeway collapsed due to heavy rain in the Cajon Pass, Calif., in February. David Pardo/The Daily Press

remained at 18.3 cents a gallon since 1993, breaking a record this spring for its longest gap between increases. The last record was set when the tax remained at 4 cents from October 1959 through March 1983.

Trump recently said he could consider higher fuel taxes as part of his infrastructure plan, although that could meet resistance from fellow Republicans in Congress.

Only about a dozen states have gone longer than the federal government without raising their motor fuel taxes.

One of those was Tennessee, where Republican Gov. Bill Haslam signed a bill last month to phase in a 6-cent-a-gallon gas tax hike and a 10-cent diesel tax increase. To win passage in the Republican-dominated state, the fuel tax hikes were paired with tax cuts on groceries, investment gains, corporate manufacturers and disabled veterans so that supporters could tout them as "pocketbook neutral."

The transportation plan in Republican-led Indiana raises an average of \$1.2 billion annually by increasing gas taxes and vehicle fees and gradually shifting fuel sales taxes from the state's general fund to infrastructure.

California's \$5 billion annual plan raises fuel taxes and vehicle fees to pay for repairs to state and local roads, while also providing money for public transit and biking and walking trails.

Montana, which suspended several road projects last year because of funding uncertainties, recently approved its first fuel tax increase in nearly a quarter century. Without the tax hike, the state could have missed out on some federal funding because it lacked enough local money to match it.

Although California's plan was passed largely by Democrats, many other transportation funding measures have enjoyed bipartisan support.

That's partly because they have been backed by the business community as economic necessities, Davis said.

Wins at polls

Transportation plans also have enjoyed widespread success at the polls. Voters approved 269 of the 361 transportation funding measures placed on the 2016 ballot by states, counties, cities, townships and other districts, according to the American Road and Transportation Builders Association. The nearly three-quarters approval rate was right on the 10-year average for transportation ballot measures.

Transportation funding measures also are pending in other legislatures, including Louisiana, Minnesota, Oklahoma and Oregon. A gas tax hike was defeated in the Missouri House this year and another was vetoed by New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez, a Republican.

Shhh. Hear the rustle of grass? Not so much now in US parks

By SETH BORENSTEIN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The call of the wild is getting harder to hear.

Peaceful, natural sounds—bird songs, rushing rivers and rustling grass—are sometimes being drowned out by noise from people in many of America's protected parks and wilderness areas, a new study finds.

Scientists measured sound levels at 492 places—from city parks to remote federal wilderness. They calculated that in nearly two-thirds of the Lower 48's parks, the noise can at times be twice the natural background level because of airplanes, cars, logging, mining and oil and gas drilling.

That increase can harm wildlife, making it harder for them to find food or mates,

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and make it harder for people to hear those natural sounds, the researchers said. Colorado State University biologist George Wittemyer said people hear only half the sounds that they would in natural silence.

"They're being drowned out," said Wittemyer, a co-author of the research.

In about 1 in five public lands, there's a tenfold increase in noise pollution, according to the study in Thursday's journal Science.

"It's something that's sort of happening slowly," Wittemyer said.

Except for city parks, though, the researchers are not talking about sound levels that people would con-



A National Park Service staffer sets up an acoustic recording station on Going-to-the-Sun Road to capture the impact of traffic on acoustic conditions in Glacier National Park, Mont. National Park Service

sider unusually loud. Even the tenfold increases they write about are often the equivalent of changing from the quiet of a rural area to a still pretty silent library.

But that difference masks a lot of sounds that are cru-

mals running through the grasslands... the wind going through the grass," Wittemyer said. "Those are really valuable and important sounds for humans to hear and help in their rejuvenation and their self-reflection."

For study lead author Rachel Buxton, a Colorado State conservation biology researcher, it can be personal. She points to a Thanksgiving weekend hike last year with her husband in the La Garita Wilderness in southern Colorado.

"We went to escape the crowds. We went to be totally isolated and have a real wilderness experience," Buxton recalled. "As we're hiking, aircraft goes overhead. You're walking along and you can hear the jet coming for ages."

The research team, which includes a special unit of the National Park Service, not

only measured sounds across the U.S., but they also used elaborate computer programs and artificial learning systems to determine what sounds were natural and which were made by people.

"The study makes perfect sense to me," George Mason University biology professor David Luther, who wasn't part of the research. He said in an email that he's noticed more noise at many sites throughout the U.S.

"Olympic National Park is currently suffering high amounts of noise pollution from military flight trainings low over the park and visitors have been complaining loudly about the diminished wilderness experience," he wrote.

But there are still some places where you can get away from it all, Buxton said, highlighting Great Sand Dunes National Park in Colorado.