

# Contractors: Road spending will boost jobs

By Paul J. Nyden

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — West Virginia could gain almost 10,000 jobs and create nearly \$1 billion in economic output if the state would devote more funds to fix the state's crumbling roads and bridges, a contractors group said in releasing a new study Tuesday.

The study, prepared by Alison Premo Black, senior vice president of the American Road and Transportation Builders Association, urges state lawmakers to increased expenditures to \$500 million a year for highway and bridge construction. That would be about twice the state's current level of spending on highway construction and maintenance.

“Although the recession officially ended in June 2009, construction employment in West Virginia was down 23 percent in November 2014, compared to prerecession levels,” Black said at a news conference held by the Contractors Association of West Virginia.

Construction jobs in West Virginia dropped by 11.3 percent between November 2013 and November 2014, eliminating 3,800 jobs. It was the biggest percentage drop in any state in the country, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

During the same 12 months, construction jobs throughout the country grew by 4 percent.

“In West Virginia, 33 percent of our roads are in poor condition, the third worst in the country. We also have the second-highest rate of highway fatalities per mile on our roads,” said Mike Clowser, executive director of the Contractors Association of West Virginia.

The study, “The Economic Impact of an Annual \$500 Million Increase in Highway and Bridge Construction Investment in West Virginia,” reports that:

n Today, 28 percent of West Virginia's 10,433 miles of roads eligible for federal aid are rated as “not acceptable” because they need major repairs or replacement.

n West Virginia has 7,099 bridges, 35.2 percent of which are “structurally deficient” or “functionally obsolete.” Repairing those bridges would cost about \$2.6 billion.

Increased spending, Clowser said, could be funded in a variety of ways, including: increasing Division of Motor Vehicles fees, raising state sales taxes on fuels and transferring state sales taxes people pay for vehicle parts and services from the state's General Fund to the State Road Fund.

Clowser also suggested the West Virginia Turnpike could issue bonds to help finance road projects in Southern West Virginia.

An increase to \$500 million in spending would still be less than the \$750 million in annual spending recommended by the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Highways — spending that still would not fund any major expansions of the highway system.

During the news conference, Black emphasized that construction jobs help the entire economy in many ways.

“People will buy more clothing. They are more likely to buy houses. And they go out to dinner more often,” she said. “Better roads also lead to fewer maintenance costs for vehicles.”

Black said research done by her organization also shows that “transportation is a bipartisan issue. There is high approval from people of all political persuasions to invest in roads, highways and bridges.”

Today, because counties and towns own few roads, West Virginia’s Division of Highways is responsible for the sixth-largest state highway and road network in the nation.

Clowser pointed out that four states surrounding West Virginia — Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia — “are making significant changes to their highway systems. We feel it is time to do the same in West Virginia.”

The failure to spend more state money on construction and maintenance does not end up saving money for state residents.

“People pay for it one way or another,” Black said. “Bad roads lead to damage to people’s cars and trucks. And there are longer commuting times for many people.”

Today, Clowser estimates, poor road quality costs West Virginians \$400 million a year in damage to their vehicles.

Clowser said the DOH does “a great job to take care of our roads” with its limited funds.

“But if we are to continue to attract companies like Procter & Gamble and Marcellus Shale gas companies, we have to have good roads.”

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