

## A change in approach

by Anne Wallace Allen

Published: June 6th, 2013



Idaho Transportation Department Director Brian Ness gave state lawmakers some bad news this year on road and bridge maintenance. Ness said that in less than 10 years, almost one-third of Idaho's highways would need pavement repairs. More than one-third of the bridges on the state's highway system have reached 50 years of age – close to the end of their life spans.

Ness told lawmakers it costs \$262 million to keep the existing system in the condition it's in right now.

The sum was striking.

But what really resonated was the cost of deferred maintenance in failing to make necessary improvements: \$543 million annually.

Ness was back at the podium June 4 with other local leaders to talk about the action needed on transportation to keep Idaho economically competitive in the years ahead.

Ness joined George Iliff, the managing owner of Colliers International; newly elected Ada County Highway District Commissioner Jim Hansen; Idaho Health Department Central District spokesman Dave Fotsch (a self-described "bicycling evangelist"); local business owner Skip Oppenheimer; and Nampa Mayor Tom Dale on an *Idaho Business Review* breakfast series panel.

The unified message from a diverse panel was clear: The Legislature must take action to pay for maintaining roads and bridges.

One option is TEDZ, an idea that came up this year in the Legislature but ran out of gas in March. TEDZ, or transportation and economic development zones, would use some of the additional sales taxes generated by the growth around highway projects to pay for the highway projects.

Another program already in limited use is STAR, or state tax anticipated revenue. Under STAR, which was approved by the Idaho Legislature in 2007, developers pay their own money for road improvements and then are repaid later from sales tax revenue collected from their projects. STAR was used to build an I-90 interchange in Post Falls for Cabela's.

And then there's the local option tax. So far, most local areas don't have the option of levying that tax to pay for transportation or anything else, and that's something the panelists would like the Legislature to change.

Dale, who has long worked on transportation issues, favors user fees, such as an increase in the gas tax. He said June 4 that the gas tax increase is his favorite because it solves Idaho's transportation maintenance problems at a state level, instead of using federal funds.

"The urgency is there to do something in the next session," Dale said.

That's a message panelists returned to repeatedly: that lawmakers shouldn't hew so closely to their fiscal conservatism that they fail to maintain the investment Idahoans have put into the state's roads and bridges.

"If your core political belief is that conservatives never raise taxes, you're in trouble," Dale said. "I believe it's conservative to pay the dollar to fix the road today, as opposed to the \$14 to fix the road for your grandkids."

Perhaps Ness put it best when he called on the Legislature to invest before poor road conditions

harm Idaho's fragile economic recovery.

"The economy of Idaho is starting to turn around," Ness said. "If we don't fund transportation, that's the fastest way to shut down the economy.

"I challenge everybody in this room when they talk to their legislators, ask them, 'Why would you not vote to provide every citizen a safe and mobile transportation system, whether they are riding a bike, using the public transit system, getting on a plane, or using our roads?'

"Why wouldn't you do that? Why would you not vote for a 25 percent reduction in fatalities and serious injuries, that could save every man, woman and child in Idaho \$300 a year? Why would you not vote to reduce our load-restricted bridges to zero in a 10-year period? ... Why would you not vote to add an additional 4,000 jobs to our economy by rebuilding our system? Why would you not vote to put us back to work, to spend a dollar right now to fix our roads while they're in good condition, rather than pass on a debt to our children of \$6 to \$14 or more?

"If you wait down the road, that's 3.6 billion dollars more we need, and that's a debt we're passing on to our children. It's difficult to say, 'No, I won't vote to sustain the economy.'"

*Anne Wallace Allen is managing editor of the Idaho Business Review.*

Complete URL: <http://idahobusinessreview.com/2013/06/06/a-change-in-approach/>