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‘Our state has invested billions ... yet nothing is done to maintain it’

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AGC Exec. Dir. Wayne Hammon, Central Paving President Pat McEntee and Central Paving Project Manager Garry Mattson visit the 10-mile stretch of I-84 that is being resurfaced and repaved. Photo by Patrick Sweeney.

Idaho Associated General Contractors Executive Director Wayne Hammon has been bringing together state agencies and private groups since last spring to discuss the state’s multimillion dollar transportation funding shortfall before the Legislature convenes in early 2014.

“Our state has invested billions in infrastructure and transportation and yet nothing is done to maintain it,” Hammon said. “It is not a recipe for success.”

The discussion is part of a larger conversation about transportation and infrastructure funding needs in Idaho, said AAA of Idaho spokesman Dave Carlson. His organization has created a website called Better Roads for Idaho that provides information about transportation funding and seeks input from drivers about possible solutions, including getting truckers to pay more.

The AAA site says its guiding principle is to find a solution that is “fair to both cars and trucks.” Right now, the group said, passenger cars contribute the largest share of transportation funding – about 70 percent of the money that goes into the state’s highway distribution account.

“The fact is, cars are overpaying their equity share for our roads and bridges on the state system by about 26 percent, while combination trucks, which have a significantly bigger impact on roads than individual and family vehicles, pay about 27 percent less than their fair share of current costs,” AAA says on its website.

Fixing the funding shortfall will be the job of state lawmakers, Carlson said.

“At one point or another, Idaho will have to step up to the plate because there’s not much to suggest the feds will,” he said.

According to the state Department of Transportation, Idaho’s gas tax hasn’t been adjusted since 1996 and most registration fees haven’t changed since 1997. Carlson acknowledges that any type of increase in taxes is never met with favor.

“It is a funding sore spot and politically explosive,” Carlson said.

According to the Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter’s 2010 Task Force on Modernizing Transportation Funding, the annual maintenance budget for state and local roadway projects is \$262 million. The total for all Idaho transportation needs, including operations, safety enhancements, restoration, and new construction is \$543 million annually, which includes the maintenance component.

“At some point, it goes from being maintenance project to full reconstruction,” Central Paving Project Manager and AGC President Garry Mattson.

Central Paving is conducting maintenance work on a 10-mile stretch of Interstate 84 outside of Boise from milepost 60 to 70.

“High profile projects get attention and money directed at them, but it’s maintenance that is harder to put your hands around,” Mattson said.

Sen. Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian, sits on the Senate Transportation Committee and said any discussion of a hike to the gas tax or registration fees has been met with opposition.

“As much as I don’t like to say it, [transportation] users are going to have to pay more,” Hagedorn said. “But with the economy that way it is, it’s really tough to swallow.”

Idaho Trucking Association spokeswoman Julie Pipal said the association supports adequate funding for the system; however there isn’t an agreement on how to get there among the many stakeholders involved in those conversations with the AGC.

“One of the critical things anytime you seek funding from users is telling them what you intend to do with it,” Pipal said. “The public won’t accept a laundry list...they need to see exactly what those transportation needs are, and how to fund those priorities.”

Hammon said transportation funding is about more than building and maintaining roadways.

“How can we attract top manufacturing jobs if we can’t repair our bridges?” he said. “No big business would have this big of an investment and not schedule any maintenance on it.”