

## Panel faces tough decisions with new transportation money

By RYAN STRUYK, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — A bridge over the Snake River that carries 1,600 cars each day to and from the small town of Grand View is structurally deficient.

Meanwhile, in northern Idaho, a major interstate needs 7 miles of new guardrails on a winding stretch. And an eastern Idaho rural intersection needs a left-turn lane to make it safer.

These are just some of more than 700 maintenance projects across Idaho that will be vying for new money from the state's six-member transportation panel in the coming weeks.

The \$95 million last-minute compromise passed by lawmakers is a good first step, officials agree. But it won't solve all the problems, setting up tough decisions over where that money will go.

Department of Transportation head Brian Ness said the panel hasn't made specific decisions on that yet, but it will be focused on maintaining and preserving the current state of roads — not sweeping lane expansions or new highways.

Ness said his staff will present guidelines for how to select projects to later this month. Potential projects, which range from just a few thousand dollars to several million dollars, will be considered in June.

Roughly 60 percent of that money will be dealt by the Idaho Transportation Board. The rest will be spent by local counties and highway districts.

But it remains unclear which projects will make the cut.

Julie DeLorenzo, a board member from Boise, said safety will be a priority in the decision-making.

"The \$95 million is a good start, and the board and leadership intend to make that money go just as far as we can," she said.

Fixing restricted bridges and increasing economic opportunity are also important, she said. DeLorenzo also emphasized that roads in all areas of the state need support, not just areas that have the most traffic.

"People in Idaho who live in Boise don't only drive on Boise roads," she said. "The safety of all of our roads is key."

But Lynn Humphreys, who chairs the Post Falls Highway District board in northern Idaho, said giving statewide money to more populated areas is always a concern.

"There are never enough dollars to go around and do all the maintenance that needs to get done," he said. "There are still going to be some roads that are going to be neglected."

Humphreys said he expects between \$200,000 and \$400,000 in local funds to come to his district, but still may have to convert some paved roads to gravel.

This is because lawmakers funded only a third of the state's annual \$262 million shortfall — and didn't even start to address an additional \$281 million per year for safety and capacity improvements.

"What we have now slows the rate of decline," said Ness. "But we will still continue to have that decline until we can bridge that gap to the \$262 million."

Ness said crumbling bridges cause the greatest concern because they hurt businesses trying to transport their products.

"As they continue to deteriorate, we need to place restrictions on those bridges," said Ness. "The more restricted bridges we have, the more that impedes moving goods."

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