

Proposal would shift state police funds to roads, bridges

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho's state police budget would see a dramatic \$16.7 million drop in funding with the goal to provide more dollars to the state's aging roads and bridges under a new bill headed to the Senate floor.

The proposal is appealing to those inside the Idaho Statehouse as part of an ongoing effort to chip away at the state's ever-growing transportation funding shortfall — currently estimated at \$165 million. Yet the proposal has also hit an unsettling chord among lawmakers hesitant to slash more than 20 percent of the Idaho State Police's budget with no funding alternative in place.

"If the money wasn't replaced, effectively three-fourths of our patrol division wouldn't be funded," state police Col. Ralph Powell warned lawmakers on Thursday. He added that the agency is already facing a shortage of patrol officers because of a lack of funding.

Currently, the state police receive 5 percent of the first 25 cents of the state's fuel tax revenue. The remaining revenue is split between local highway districts and state roads. The new bill would strip the state police from receiving those fuel-tax dollars.

The seven-member Senate Transportation Committee approved the proposal on a voice vote Thursday, with three out of the committee's seven members opposed.

"I am confident we will not allow a draconian cut of 21 percent" of the state police budget, said Sen. Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian, who supported the measure. "That priority will bubble up to the top."

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter did not request new funding for the state police in his annual proposed budget revealed earlier this year. While lawmakers are not required to follow the governor's recommendations, it remains an influential blueprint during the budget-setting process.

Competing proposals for any extra state funding are already being tossed around this year at the same time the Idaho Legislature is considering a nearly \$27 million tax cut. This means securing funding for any surprise budget demands could be difficult for the Joint Finance Appropriations budget committee.

"Should this bill pass, there would be no guarantee that the state police would receive the entire amount back or a quarter of the amount," said Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, co-chair of legislative budget committee. "We recognize that there is a safety issue in not funding the state police, so that would bring it up higher on the priority list."

Lawmaker increased the fuel tax from 25 cents to 32 cents last year. That 7 cent bump is devoted to local highways and state roads, but the \$95 million plan still falls short of addressing the long-term needs of the state's transportation budget.

Republican Sen. Lori Den Hartog of Meridian, the bill's sponsor, said she was confident the budget committee could find a solution to prevent a slash to the state police budget.

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