

Brown vows to fix CA's crumbling roads

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Los Angeles city worker Ralph Mendoza repairs a street in downtown Los Angeles on Thursday, Sept. 11, 2014. Poorly maintained highways and major roads cost Californians an extra \$44 billion each year in repairs, accidents and time and fuel burned in traffic, according to a report issued Thursday by a transportation advocacy group. (AP Photo/Nick Ut) *The Associated Press*

SACRAMENTO — California's crumbling roads, highways and bridges gained a strong ally last Monday when Gov. Jerry Brown said in his inaugural address that fixing the state's aging infrastructure was among his top goals for 2015.

His call to action was welcomed by advocates who, for years, have warned that transportation funds are running on fumes.

But even with the governor's help, the task of raising money for the state's \$59 billion in needed transportation upkeep remains mammoth. And agreeing on a long-term solution — which a growing number of observers say will require a mileage-based driving tax — may still be years away.

"I'm pleased to see it's on his radar. ... The big question always is: 'How do you pay for all this stuff?'" said Gary Gallegos, head of SANDAG, San Diego region's transportation planning agency.

A comprehensive look at San Diego County's deferred maintenance projects wasn't available on Friday.

But a sample of six major projects, from pavement rehabilitation on East County highways to bridge retrofits on Interstates 5 and 15 in North County, totals \$65 million, according to figures provided by Caltrans.

Brown offered few specifics for financing deferred transportation maintenance on Friday when he unveiled his \$113

billion state spending plan, other than to say he'd bring a bipartisan group of lawmakers and stakeholders together.

"I'm identifying the problem," he told reporters at a press conference. "It's difficult. ... I'm not going to preempt discussions."

The governor stopped short of saying a mileage-based driving tax was the way to solve the issue, but he noted he'll speed up a state pilot project that's studying how such a tax might work. He'll do that by creating five staff positions and pumping \$9.4 million into the project, which is expected to report on its findings no later than June 2018, according to his spending plan.

In the meantime, transportation leaders say Brown and the Legislature have several options. They could propose an increase in the state fuel tax, which along with the federal gas tax pays for road repairs, but hasn't been raised in two decades.

They could add fees to electric car drivers, who currently don't pay the gasoline tax, but do cause wear and tear on roadways.

They could seek funds from the state's newly created cap-and-trade program. Or they could impose other fees such as on vehicle registrations.

Alone, none of these options are considered long-term solutions for funding the upkeep of California's run-down transportation system.

The prospect of a mileage based fee has stirred concerns about the government potentially tracking individuals' driving patterns through a device placed in cars. It would also be a major shift from the way the state collects its per gallon gas tax. Still, it might be the eventual answer, some say.

"I think ultimately down the road, the mileage fee is the only fair way to do it," said Jim Earp, director of the California Alliance on Jobs, which represents construction companies and workers and has long-advocated for more transportation funding.

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