

Opinion: California's roads need costly repair

By Dan Walters

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The good news is that after decades of ignoring the deterioration of California's once-world-class highway system, our politicians have finally awakened to the crisis.

The not-so-good news is that they may take a minimalist approach to get themselves off the hook without truly restoring the system.

With well over 300 billion vehicle-miles of pavement-pounding travel each year, our highways and local roads and streets are in sad shape. California not only has the nation's worst traffic congestion but the nation's second worst pavement conditions.

A 2011 report from the California Transportation Commission stated it tersely:

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"Today, California's transportation system is in jeopardy. Investments to preserve transportation systems simply have not kept pace with the demands on them, and this underfunding – decade after decade – has led to the decay of one of the state's greatest assets."

Congestion delays and damage to cars from potholed pavement cost Californians untold billions of dollars each year. And it's a downer in the global competition for job-creating investment.

Gov. Jerry Brown, openly disdainful of highways during his first governorship, finally devoted two paragraphs in his Jan. 5 State of the State/inaugural address to the crisis, urging action on "\$59 billion in needed upkeep and maintenance," and adding, "Each year we fall further behind and we must do something about it."

But what? He didn't say.

This week, Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins proposed a plan, including an unspecified "new road user charge," to boost highway spending by \$2 billion a year for five years.

Atkins uttered the right words, saying highways are "a key part of fixing the future." However, her \$10 billion proposal is barely one-sixth of the \$59 billion Brown cited – which is probably way too low.

The 2011 California Transportation Commission report said the state system needed \$165.9 billion in work over the next decade, including \$79.7 billion for "preservation and rehabilitation." Local streets and roads, it said, needed another \$102.9 billion in maintenance.

Some would come from existing revenue sources, but they fall way short. Meanwhile, the Legislature's budget analyst has reported that only a tiny fraction of existing revenue goes to maintenance, while the Department of Transportation has 3,000 more engineering employees than it needs.

And before someone uses it as an excuse for inaction, Brown's pet bullet-train project, which would cost a minimum of \$68 billion, would not relieve the traffic pressure.

By the High-Speed Rail Authority's own numbers, when completed in 2040, it would reduce automotive traffic by less than 1 percent.

Truly restoring the state's highway system would be very expensive, but the alternative of allowing its deterioration to continue would be catastrophic.

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