

## Report Urges Boost to Spending on Transportation Network

By

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The U.S. still needs a big spending boost to upgrade roads, bridges and transit networks, the Transportation Department said in a report Friday, which came as Washington lawmakers push different plans to fund infrastructure improvements.

The department's biennial report on the state of the nation's transportation infrastructure did highlight some progress, including better bridge conditions between 2000 and 2010, as well as cheaper highway building costs in 2010—the year from which data for the study are mostly drawn.

But the nation's aging surface-transit infrastructure—including nearly 4.1 million miles of public roads—would benefit from tens of billions of dollars in added spending over current levels, the report claimed.

The department said capital spending on roads and bridges totaled \$100.2 billion in 2010, helped by a nearly \$12 billion boost from the 2009 federal economic-stimulus law that the Transportation Department credited for increased travel "on pavements with good ride quality."

The recent anniversary of that legislation ignited fresh debate on Capitol Hill this month as Democrats praised the law for aiding economic recovery, while Republicans criticized it for raising the federal debt.

Transportation spending in 2010 actually exceeded the level the report estimated the U.S. needs to spend annually over a 20-year span—\$65.3 billion to \$86.3 billion—in order to merely maintain conditions on roads and bridges. But the government would need to spend \$123.7 billion to \$145.9 billion each year to significantly improve conditions and performance, the report said.

The American Society of Civil Engineers gave America's roads a D grade in a report card released a year ago, due in part to costly congestion in urban areas. Bridges fared slightly better at C plus, but transit, such as rail and bus systems, also got a D. Friday's report said total spending on transit in 2010 was \$2 billion below the \$18.5 billion needed annually to merely achieve "good repair". Billions more is need in transit upgrades, the report said.

"Just the status quo is not going to work," said Casey Dinges, senior managing director at ASCE, which is among a number of groups representing industries that stand to benefit from an increase in government spending on roads.

Chris Edwards, director of tax-policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, argued in a paper last year that the federal government has long spent unwisely and inefficiently on infrastructure projects. He said the state and local government, plus the private sector, are more likely to make sound investments. Government infrastructure boosters "are good at scaring the public about falling down bridges" to increase what he regards as unnecessary federal spending, he said in an email Friday.

Infrastructure spending is a hot topic in Washington, with both parties introducing plans this week aimed at funding infrastructure improvements. The proposals come amid warnings from U.S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx that the Highway Trust Fund, which finances the federal highway system, could run dry by August. Taxes on gasoline and diesel fuel used to finance the system haven't been raised in 20 years.

Mr. Obama's plan aims for \$302 billion in infrastructure upgrades over four years, paid for by changes to the tax code. Dave Camp of Michigan, the Republican leader of the House Ways and Means committee, proposed a separate tax overhaul that would raise \$126.5 billion for upgrades.