

# The Des Moines Register

## State to study funding for road repairs

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Two weeks ago, the idea of raising taxes for road and bridge repair projects appeared dead on arrival for the Iowa Legislature's return in January, especially since many lawmakers face re-election next year.

But a deadly bridge collapse in Minnesota, coupled with reports on the crumbling condition of Iowa's roads and bridges, have Gov. Chet Culver and key legislative leaders seriously exploring ways to find more money for construction work, state officials said last week.

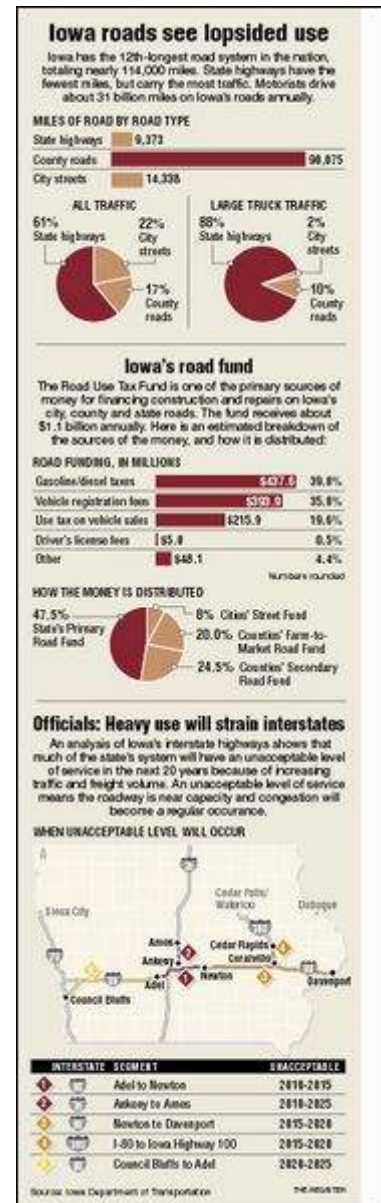
"Given the significant bridge and road infrastructure needs statewide, the governor believes the state must come up with additional infrastructure funding," said Brad Anderson, Culver's chief spokesman.

The Democratic governor will have an infrastructure package to present to lawmakers in January and hopes to reach a bipartisan consensus, Anderson said.

In Minnesota, a special legislative session may be called to address bridge safety issues. Culver has no plans to call a special session in Iowa, Anderson said.

Anderson noted that the Iowa Transportation Commission in June approved a five-year plan that includes about \$500 million for bridge repair. The Iowa Department of Transportation has assured the governor this plan "will allow the state to make the repairs necessary in a timely fashion to keep our bridges safe," he said.

Iowa lawmakers have established an interim legislative committee that will meet this fall to study road financing issues and make recommendations. The panel was created in response to an Iowa DOT report issued last



### Download road study

Download the DOT study on Iowa's roads:  
[www.dot.state.ia.us/time21/images/RUTF%20Study%20FINAL%20122906.pdf](http://www.dot.state.ia.us/time21/images/RUTF%20Study%20FINAL%20122906.pdf)

December that found state, city and county roads face a \$27.7 billion shortfall for road and bridge construction and repairs over the next two decades.

At a minimum, Iowa needs an additional \$200 million annually in road construction money, which would be equal to a 9-cent-per-gallon increase in gasoline and diesel fuel taxes, the Iowa DOT report said. Other options include increases in fees for vehicle registration and driver's licenses.

"I am optimistic that we are going to do something," said State Sen. Tom Rielly, an Oskaloosa Democrat and the interim committee's co-chairman. "We all want good roads to ride on, and it is vital to the economic development of our state. But what happened in Minnesota reinforced the importance of the whole safety factor of this thing."

Despite the Minnesota disaster, some Iowans said last week that they strongly oppose higher taxes for gasoline or other fees to finance more work on the state's roads and bridges.

"Absolutely not, no way. They are high enough. No new taxes," said Steve Den Herder of Urbandale, who just returned from a family trip in a recreational vehicle to Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming.

Nina Deist, who works at the Chatterbox Cafe in Audubon, was riding her daughter's mo-ped last week around the town to save money on gasoline. She said she's willing to pay more in taxes for road and bridge repair projects, "but only if there is no money anywhere else."

Richard Schomburg of Mount Vernon, who was returning on Interstate Highway 80 from a high school class reunion in Nebraska, was more open to raising taxes or fees.

"Nine cents wouldn't bother me" for an increase in gasoline taxes, "although that's about the maximum I feel would be reasonable," said Schomburg, a retired electronics technician. "Our roads perpetually need maintenance, and bridges are a part of that."

A review last week by the Des Moines Register of U.S. Department of Transportation records for nearly 25,000 Iowa bridges showed 19 percent were either structurally deficient or had outdated features and ranked poorly on a scale that measures bridges' surface, structure and support.

Engineering experts said that doesn't mean the bridges are dangerous, but they may be too narrow, have cracks, or are unable to carry heavy loads.

The details of a possible road construction revenue package are still under discussion, state officials said. State fuel taxes, per gallon, are now 20.7 cents for gasoline, 19 cents for ethanol-blended gasoline, and 22.5 cents for diesel. The last time Iowa had an increase in the state's motor fuel tax was in 1989, and costs for road construction have risen sharply since then, said Dan Franklin, an Iowa DOT policy administrator.

State Rep. Geri Huser, an Altoona Democrat and co-chairwoman of the interim study

committee, said last week she won't support an increase in gasoline taxes because such a move would infuriate many voters. But raising diesel fuel taxes might be acceptable to the trucking industry, she said.

In addition, lawmakers may consider increasing pickup truck registration fees, now \$65 per year, while increasing minimum registration fees for older cars, now as low as \$8 annually, she said. Also, overweight trucks, which can damage bridges, may face stiffer fines, she said.

Iowa House Republican Leader Christopher Rants of Sioux City said his party is willing to work with Democrats on the road money issue.

But Republicans will want to carefully study the details of such a plan, and will want some assurances that local highway projects will be completed, he said.

"This is a very parochial issue in some parts of the state," Rants said. "If you are a legislator along Highway 20 or Highway 30, the DOT has essentially told us that you will never get your projects done unless some sort of additional revenue is put into the road fund."

In western Iowa, community leaders have lobbied for completion of a four-lane expressway on U.S. Highway 20. DOT officials estimate it will cost about \$500 million to construct the final stretches linking Sioux City and Fort Dodge.

Huser said the road construction money debate should focus on how many roads Iowa needs and the state's priorities.

Iowa has nearly 114,000 miles of roads - the 12th-longest road system nationally - and most of roads are rural county roads. Marshall County Engineer Royce Fichtner, a lobbyist for the Iowa County Engineers Association, said there are major legal hurdles to abandoning little-used county roads. But county officials have already reduced maintenance in some cases, eliminating snow removal and not adding more gravel to save money, he said.

David Scott, executive director of the Iowa Good Roads Association, a coalition of local governments and businesses that supports road improvements, said the road financing issue can't be ignored.

"Regardless of what happened in Minnesota, we have this huge infrastructure that we have developed over the past 100 years, and it will have to be maintained," he said.

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