

Home / News / Local / Government and Politics / Government and Politics

Road revenue options considered at DOT hearing in Waterloo

- Story
- Discussion

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WATERLOO, Iowa --- A governor's task force gathered here Wednesday looking for ways to keep up maintenance of Iowa's 114,000-plus miles of road.

More than 100 people attended the meeting of Gov. Terry Branstad's Transportation 2020 Citizen Advisory Commission at the Five Sullivan Brothers Convention Center.

Transportation officials described how rising costs and needs have pushed this year's \$1.21 billion budget to the limit. They outlined possible money-generating ideas including raising fuel taxes, raising registration or driver's license renewal fees or possibly taxing drivers based on mileage.

"There's an array of alternatives to raise funding," said Nancy Richardson, panel co-chair and former Iowa Department of Transportation director.

Bob Bouska, distribution manager for East Penn manufacturing, said higher fuel prices would be offset by allowing him to find the shortest and most efficient routes on deliveries. Poor road maintenance costs him more than a few cents per gallon extra on gas.

"Bring it on," he said. "I'm spending more than that plowing myself out in the winter."

David Deeds of Waterloo suggested creative solutions beyond raising money for an antiquated system. Iowa's population has grown by only 4 percent in the last 30 years and shifted to urban areas, with two-thirds of Iowa counties losing population in the last U.S. Census report, he said.

"Do we really need a transportation system designed in 1950?" he asked. Deeds said the panel should consider funding other means of transportation including passenger rail service.

Representatives of local governments also expressed their concern for the infrastructure they are in charge of maintaining. Kevin Blanshan, director of transportation for Iowa Northland Regional County of Governments, said INRCOG metro areas have \$83 million in unmet road repair needs. He pointed to plans for University Avenue in Waterloo and Cedar Falls which won't come to fruition under current revenue projections.

"We've overlaid it so many times it can't be done anymore," he said.

County officials stressed the need to repair decaying condition of rural roads and bridges.

Dusten Rolando, county engineer for Floyd and Chickasaw counties. said one-fourth to one-third of the bridges in those counties are either obsolete or structurally deficient. Severe weather and rising construction costs have pushed costs higher, he added.

Buchanan County Engineer Brian Keierleber said county governments get a disproportionate amount of state transportation dollars to upkeep their share of roads.

The meeting was the sixth of seven across the state before the panel prepares a report to be submitted to the 2012 by the Iowa Legislature.

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