Survey shows Idahoans are worried about the future of the state’s roads

By: Brad Iverson-Long, Idaho Business Review
July 9, 2014

A new survey showing that most likely voters in Idaho are concerned with the conditions of the state’s roads and bridges could help efforts to convince state lawmakers and the public for a new transportation funding plan, according to a leading road funding proponent.

The survey, from the University of Idaho’s James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy Research, found that nearly three-quarters of likely voters surveyed consider Idaho’s roads and bridges to be very important to the economy, but only about a quarter indicated that infrastructure in place now is adequate for the state’s needs in a decade. Most respondents felt that the state’s road system adequately serves their needs today, but slightly more than half of respondents also said that more funding for roads should be one of the top three priorities for state lawmakers.

The survey had lots of data that will be useful to lawmakers, said Wayne Hammon, executive director of the Associated General Contractors of Idaho and one of the leaders of the Idaho Transportation Coalition, a group advocating for more money for roads. “It’s a catalyst for doing something today,” said Hammon, who said the survey shows that voters are concerned with the future of Idaho roads, even roads that may not be in adequate condition. “They recognize that without investment, without a strategy, that’s not going to stay and will fail within 10 years.”

Hammon said one of the most surprising findings from the survey, released July 8, was that just 10 percent of respondents agreed to the statement that taxes are already too high so they wouldn’t support more funding no matter. “With the conservative nature of our state, I was surprised that very few people bought into that argument,” Hammon said. Only a slightly larger percentage of respondents said they wouldn’t support spending more money for roads because the money would be misused or wasted by the government.

Idaho’s road system is underfunded by $543 million every year, with $262 million needed just for maintenance, according to studies by the Idaho Transportation Department. McClure Center interim director Priscilla Salant said in a news release that the survey shows that all likely voters in Idaho make a connection between transportation and the economy. The key question for policymakers now is where to find revenue to pay for what Idaho’s voters see as important, she said.

When it came to potential funding ideas, only a few potential options received the support of half of the respondents. Those included increasing vehicle registration fees, charging a one-time fee when buying a new or used car, and using the current sales tax on automotive parts and tires. The most widely opposed revenue sources were raising property taxes, establishing toll roads, and basing fees based on how many miles a person drives. Increasing fuel taxes also was not popular.

Hammon said lawmakers will have to decide where the money comes from. It will likely include multiple new revenue sources. “I don’t think there’s any appetite for that kind of big tax increase,” said Hammon, who said efforts in 2009 to raise taxes and fees were “too big of a bite too fast.”