

ITD touts success to lawmakers, funding problems loom

By RUTH BROWN rbrown@idahopress.com

January 24, 2017



Brian Ness



Numerous potholes received emergency repair starting Jan. 11 from the Idaho Transportation Department along Interstate 84 between Nampa and Caldwell.

BOISE — The increase of gas taxes and vehicle registration fees imposed two years ago has helped reduce by at least one-third the state's annual shortfall for road and bridge maintenance, the head of the Idaho Transportation Department told lawmakers Tuesday.

Brian Ness, director of ITD, said revenue generated by the 2015 gas tax and fee hike added an additional \$97 million to the fund in the last year. While that's an improvement, Ness told the Joint Transportation Committee on Tuesday the state is still dealing with a shortfall of about \$165 million, an amount necessary just to keep the existing highway system in its current condition.

Ness appeared before the committee to provide information and details on Gov. Butch Otter's fiscal year 2018 transportation recommendation. Earlier this month, Otter recommended appropriating nearly \$724 million to address Idaho's transportation needs in the coming fiscal year.

Ness also touted some of the changes made to put the agency in a better position to respond to calls for snow removal and managing ice on roadways across the state.

Since ITD implemented a new method of preparing for snowstorm plowing, the rate of clear roads during the storm has dramatically improved, he said. In 2010-2011, the department reported that 28 percent of roads were cleared during a storm. In 2015-2016, ITD reported that 79 percent of roads were clear during the storm.

Vince Trimboli, spokesman for the agency, said the new "swarm" method ITD started for snowplowing includes improvements such as preparing staffing numbers in advance when the weather forecast predicts an upcoming storm.

Ness did not address some of the recent demands for highway improvements on a stretch of Interstate 84 in Canyon County. Last week, the Idaho Transportation Board moved up the timeline for a \$14 million resurfacing project on a 4-mile section of the interstate between Caldwell and Nampa. The project was previously slated for 2018, but the board shifted gears after reports of damage and pothole problems in recent weeks caused by winter storms, ice and plowing.

The repaving project is expected to span from Franklin Road in Caldwell to Karcher Road in Nampa. At this point, the agency has not included in the resurfacing project a 3-mile section from Karcher to Franklin Boulevard in Nampa, a stretch also heavily pocked by potholes and deterioration this winter.

Trimboli also said at this point there is no money available for expanding the interstate section between Nampa and Caldwell. For now, Trimboli said ITD must work within the bounds of the budget the Legislature provides.

Ness also focused on achievements that have earned the agency some national praise. In 2016, ITD earned 30 national awards for excellence and innovation, Ness said. Since 2010, ITD has earned 10 president's awards from the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials. Ness said he liked to think of those awards as "the academy awards for transportation."

While lawmakers applauded those successes, several voiced some concerns regarding funding for road improvements that haven't been addressed.

Rep. Brandon Hixon, R-Caldwell, wondered if Ness had any insight about potential funding changes at the federal level and President Donald Trump, who campaigned on promises to invest heavily in infrastructure projects nationwide.

Ness said department officials have not yet discussed those matters with the Trump transition team, and for now, said he's unaware of any new funding coming into the pipeline. Ness also noted that when the federal government refers to "infrastructure" it doesn't just apply to roads and bridges. Infrastructure funding by the federal government also applies to issues with dams, broadband internet, electrical grids and a variety of other issues.