



Budget woes keep road issues off grid

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Despite a gaping backlog and bumpy rides, state highway improvements are a virtual nonissue during the 2010 legislative session.

The chief culprit? Highways and other services face a \$3 billion drop in state revenue during the next two years.

“We are looking for the light at the end of the tunnel,” said Sherri LeBas, interim secretary for the state Department of Transportation and Development.

Most of this year’s highway legislative debates have involved issues like driving with cell phones, driver’s license rules and speed limits.

Louisiana’s backlog of road and bridge needs stands at \$12.6 billion.

Motorists spend an extra \$1,052 per year because of congested, unsafe and worn roads, according to an April report by TRIP, a nonprofit research group in Washington, D.C.

Nearly a year ago, the Public Affairs Research Council said Louisiana needs to come up with \$650 million per year in new aid for state roads and bridges by raising the gasoline tax and other steps.

Jim Brandt, president of the group, agreed that the state has made no strides on that front.

“I am not aware of anything,” he said.

Any bid to boost aid to highways through a tax increase would face huge political hurdles. Lawmakers could only consider such a move this year in a special session, and Gov. Bobby Jindal has repeatedly said he opposes tax hikes as a way out of budget problems.

The session ends on June 21.

Motorists pay 38.4 cents per gallon in state and federal taxes.

That includes 16 cents to finance rank-and-file projects. Another 4 cents pays for 16 projects that voters approved two decades ago, including construction of a bridge over the Mississippi River that will connect St. Francisville and New Roads.

Many of the high-profile projects under way today stem from budget surpluses dating back to 2007 and federal “stimulus” dollars.

LeBas said that, after July 1, the state will start using about \$40 million of tax revenue intended for rank-and-file projects to help pay for the 16 projects.

That will absorb about one to one and a half cents of the 16-cent-per-gallon tax. “That is a big hit, a big hit,” she said.

One highway issue has managed to surface in this session. The plan to spend \$48 million of capital construction dollars to widen I-12 from Juban Road to Walker.

The work is a longtime goal of residents and officials in that area, who complain of daily backups to and from work.

If the money is approved, the project could be put out for bid by the early summer of 2011, LeBas said.

In June, traffic signals on I-12 entrance ramps between Baton Rouge and Walker will start appearing.

The signals, which are called ramp meters, are common in other states but will be the first of their kind in Louisiana.

They will force vehicles to proceed one at a time along entrance ramps onto I-12 at four-second intervals, and are supposed to make merging easier.

State officials plan to install 14 ramp meters initially and two more later.