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Group cites link between declining road spending and increased fatalities

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) -- A coalition of business and labor groups links a spike in highway deaths to Illinois' stagnant spending on road projects to try and build support for a major new construction program. The Transportation for Illinois Coalition found that deaths on the busiest roads grew 15 percent from 2002 to 2005. The yearly number of road safety and improvement projects dropped 33 percent under Gov. Rod Blagojevich compared with his predecessor, the group said.

The coalition acknowledges it can't prove a direct link between deaths and spending levels. The Blagojevich administration disputes such a connection, noting that overall traffic deaths have declined in Illinois.

But the coalition says its findings, which are to be released Thursday, illustrate the need to boost safety and traffic improvements by 50 percent, an increase of \$100 million over five years.

"From time to time, you have to be willing to reinvest in your infrastructure," said Doug Whitley, the coalition's co-chairman and president of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce. "It requires constant vigilance."

The group, which includes the Illinois AFL-CIO, formed several years ago to urge state and federal officials to make road spending a higher priority. It has sharply criticized Blagojevich for diverting money from the road fund to other state needs.

The coalition's review found that the Illinois Department of Transportation planned an average of 215 sites annually for safety or traffic improvements from budget years 2000 to 2003 under former Republican Gov. George Ryan.

That dropped to an average of 145 from 2004 to 2007 under Blagojevich. It could fall to just 41 sites a year over the next six years if the Democratic governor and

the Legislature cannot agree on a way to pump new money into the road system, the coalition concluded.

Meanwhile, federal statistics show deaths on Illinois roads that belong to the National Highway System -- interstates and most state and federal highways -- increased to 473 in 2005 from 412 in 2002, a jump of 15 percent. National deaths climbed 2 percent during the same period.

The death numbers increase even when accounting for the fact that more drivers are traveling more miles on Illinois roads.

But IDOT said it could be a one-year spike. While the coalition's federal data ends in 2005, state figures show deaths on all state and federal highways rose to 609 in 2005 from 546 in 2004 , but then dropped back to 559 in 2006.

IDOT also notes that when all Illinois roads are included, rather than just the major ones, traffic deaths have declined steadily.

State government has taken several steps to improve road safety, such as installing cable barriers on interstate medians, strictly enforcing traffic violations and better coordinating safety engineering programs, said IDOT spokesman Mike Claffey.

Illinois officials are debating a major new construction program that would provide money for roads, bridges and schools. Blagojevich supports the idea, but it has been stalled by questions about where to get the money and who would decide which projects go forward.

In the meantime, Claffey said, the administration will continue to make road safety a top priority.

"Our goal is to get more bang for the buck," Claffey said. "We feel we're spending our safety dollars more wisely."

AP Broadcast story sent to all TV and Radio Stations in Illinois

Group cites link between road spending drop and increased fatalities

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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) - A coalition of business and labor groups is linking a spike in highway deaths to the state's stagnant spending on road projects.

The Transportation for Illinois Coalition found that deaths on Illinois' National Highway System roads grew 15% from 2002 to 2005.

The yearly number of road safety and improvement projects dropped 33% under the Blagojevich administration, compared to his predecessor George Ryan.

The coalition hopes to use the results to urge lawmakers to boost safety and traffic improvements by 50% -- an increase of \$100 million over five years.

The administration points to an ongoing decline in overall traffic deaths and says it is working hard to improve traffic safety with the money available, such as strictly enforcing traffic violations and installing cable safety barriers on interstates.

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