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States boosting highway spending

By Dennis Cauchon, USA TODAY

State governments are investing huge amounts of money in road construction after several years of modest spending, a change that could ease traffic congestion that has worsened sharply in the past decade.



New York may upgrade FDR Drive, where morning rush hour is framed by the lower Manhattan skyline.

By Mary Altaffer, AP

Federal, state and local spending on roads jumped 12% in the first nine months of the year and is on track to reach a record \$66.3 billion in 2005, according to Census Bureau data. That's a sharp turnaround from three consecutive years when road construction spending was flat and failed to keep up with inflation.

"We're beginning to see a renaissance in highway construction, but we need a major push over the next few years to make a difference," says John Horsley, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

The spending will accelerate long-term road projects, combining new construction and long-delayed upgrades.

Governors and legislative leaders, enjoying the most robust growth in state revenue since 2001, have started to announce major highway projects that will be considered in January when many state legislatures convene.

New York, Texas and Ohio are among at least a dozen states considering ambitious construction plans. Arkansas voters will decide Dec. 13 whether to borrow \$575 million for road projects.

HIGHWAY TO-DO LIST

- **Indiana:** Extend Interstate 69 from Indianapolis to Evansville.
- **Missouri/Illinois:** Build new Mississippi River bridge in St. Louis.
- **New York:** Upgrade FDR Drive, Henry Hudson Parkway in Manhattan.
- **Ohio:** Rebuild sections of Interstates 70 and 71 in Columbus.
- **Washington:** Upgrade earthquake-damaged Alaskan Way Viaduct in Seattle.

Nationwide, road construction has ranked low as a state government priority over the past decade, especially in 2001-03, when money was diverted from highway trust funds to support education and health care spending. Highway construction spending grew at a 4.7% annual rate from 1994 through 2004, compared with 11.5% annually for school buildings and 10% for public hospitals.

During that time, the hours that drivers spent stuck in traffic rose 17% in 85 big cities,

• Sources: USA TODAY research, AP

according to the Texas Transportation Institute.

The amount of planned spending on roads is not enough to reduce traffic congestion nationwide, but it could have a big impact in areas that get new projects, says William Buechner, economist at the American Road and Transportation Builders Association, a lobbying group for the transportation construction industry.

The new fondness for road construction follows an increased willingness of voters to approve expensive road projects.

Washington state voters approved a 9.5-cent gas tax increase in November that will pay for \$7 billion in new projects. Voters had rejected a gas tax increase two years earlier. New York voters approved borrowing \$2.9 billion for roads in November. They had rejected a similar bond issue five years ago.

Overall, more than 75% of transportation bond issues have won voter approval since November 2004. Only 50% were approved in November 2002.


"Voters are showing a willingness to pay for these projects, and states are on the financial upswing," Buechner says.

Political opposition to the highway projects has declined because most states plan to pay for new projects without raising gasoline taxes. Instead, states plan to borrow money, increase tolls, permit construction of private toll roads and stop diverting money from highway trust funds.

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