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'TROUBLE AHEAD' FOR SUBWAYS, BRIDGES IN N.Y.
NEW REPORT SEEKS BILLIONS

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ALBANY - New York should invest "tens of billions of dollars" in its transportation infrastructure over the next five years to avoid a repeat of the bridge collapses and subway derailments of the 1970s and early 1980s, a state panel recommended yesterday.

Appointed by the transportation commissioner, Joseph Boardman, the panel called for hiking tolls, fares, petroleum taxes, and other fees to pay for repairs and improvements to the statewide transportation system.

It also called for the state Department of Transportation to play a stronger role in coordinating different parts of the system and, possibly, to take over the functions of other agencies.

The report, titled "Trouble Ahead," adds to the pressure on state lawmakers to raise taxes next year. They already face a projected deficit of up to \$6 billion for the fiscal year that begins April 1; a court order to increase aid for the New York City schools, and healthcare programs for the poor that are growing faster than the revenue set aside to pay for them.

Members of the Advisory Panel on Transportation Policy for 2025 acknowledged that money is unusually tight at this time but said the problems are too urgent to put off.

"The panel has concluded that trouble lies ahead for transportation without bold leadership and substantial new investments of tens of billions of dollars in just the next five years alone," the report said. "If bold leadership is not shown, and adequate, meaningful funding is not provided, the infrastructure will deteriorate, the economy will falter, jobs will be lost, and the quality of life in New York State will suffer dramatically."

The report compared the current situation to that of the 1970s, when the state delayed investing in its infrastructure because of a fiscal crisis. Over the next decade, a truck fell through an elevated portion of the West Side Highway; a Thruway bridge collapsed in Schoharie County, and the Manhattan Bridge was closed to subway service because of cracks, the report said. Aging tracks and equipment at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority led to derailments, breakdowns, and chronic delays in subway service, it said.

"The late 1970s and early 1980s were the 'bad old days' for New York's transportation infrastructure," the report said.

"There's no question the cost is expensive," said a panel member, Elliot Sander, a senior vice president of the engineering firm DMJM Harris. "It's certainly unfortunate the state's in a fiscal crisis. But the real question is: If you don't adequately maintain the bridges and highways, and you don't adequately maintain the mass transit facilities, and you don't minimally provide for system expansion, what is the consequence of that?"

Mr. Sander, a former transportation commissioner under Mayor Giuliani, said the needs in the New York City area are particularly urgent.

"There's no free ride," Mr. Sander said. "When you have a transportation system that moves 20 million people, often several trips a day, it costs money. We also need to assure we do it as costeffectively, as cheaply as possible."

"It's obviously a struggle," said another panel member, Janette Sadik-Khan, a senior vice president of the construction and engineering firm Parsons Brinckerhoff. "Funding for transportation tends not to come to the top of screen usually unless it's broken. ... Transportation is the invisible thread that holds the city together, and unless it snaps people forget it's there."

At a news conference yesterday, Governor Pataki said he has not yet seen the report and could not comment.

The transportation commissioner generally endorsed the findings.

"The state's dedicated transportation fund needs replenishment now," Mr. Boardman said in a statement on the report.

On a related matter, Mr. Pataki did not rule out supporting a hike in tolls on the New York State Thruway, which the Thruway Authority is expected to consider today.

"I have never believed that raising taxes, raising fees, raising tolls, raising fares is something this state should look to do," Mr. Pataki said, saying he prefers to generate revenue by attracting more users. "I also understand there are times when that simply doesn't meet the hard fiscal realities that an entity faces," he said.

According to a report in the Buffalo News, authority officials are considering a 25% hike for passenger vehicles and a 35% hike for commercial traffic. An authority spokesman would not confirm those figures yesterday, saying the proposal would be announced today. If approved by the authority board and not blocked by the Legislature, it would be the first change in tolls since 1988.

Mr. Pataki also refrained from second-guessing the fare hikes proposed by the MTA, which officials there say are necessary to close a multibillion-dollar gap in the budget. Closing that gap was included in the advisory panel's call for spending "tens of billions of dollars."

Mr. Pataki said he had confidence in the decision makers at the MTA, most of whom he appointed.

"That system is the lifeblood of New York," he said. "They have to balance the desire that I strongly have to have the lowest possible fares ... while at the same time making the investments so we have the finest possible system."

A spokesman for the road- and bridge-building industry, A.J. Castelbuono of the Associated General Contractors, said lawmakers should not use the fiscal crisis as an excuse to put off investing more in transportation.

"We've been told every year for the past decade is a bad year for highway funding," Mr. Castelbuono said. "What we need to do is to face the music. Nobody wants to increase anybody's costs, that's a given, but sometimes you're at a crossroad where that's the only thing left to do."

He suggested hiking the fee for drivers' licenses - currently \$6 a year - or adding a nickel to the gasoline tax, which he said would cost the average motorist \$60 a year.

Budget watchdogs did not dispute that much of New York's transportation infrastructure is aging and in need of repairs and improvements. A study earlier this year by the Citizens Budget Commission found that 39% of New York's urban roads are in unacceptable conditions and 37% of its bridges are structurally deficient or obsolete. Like the advisory panel report, it called for increasing tolls, fares, and user fees to provide a more stable source of revenue.

A fiscal analyst with the Manhattan Institute, E.J. McMahon, said the best way to address the problem is with a voter-approved bond issue.

"They've got to determine what is essential and what isn't," Mr. McMahon said of lawmakers.

"They've got to develop a well-honed plan that's backed with cost-benefit analysis, and then put it before the people. If they do it by statute, there will be immense waste in any transportation plan."

Mr. Castelbuono, however, opposed a new plan for borrowing, saying the state already devotes too much of its transportation revenue to debt service.

"We believe in pay-as-you-go," he said. "A bond act is ... the wrong way to go because you spend so much of the money on interest."