

Commissioner: Fixing transportation trust fund means bringing the public on board

Construction on Route 80, Route 287

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Funds continue to dwindle in the state's transportation trust fund. But the current state transportation commissioner says before any solution can be implemented, policymakers need the support of the driving public.

Created during Gov. Tom Kean's administration and financed by a 14.5-cents-a-gallon gasoline tax charged at the pump, [the trust fund is currently running on fumes](#).

State officials and [Forward NJ](#) — a coalition that's focused on the waning transportation trust fund — say the fund will be empty as of June 30, as spending on maintenance and new construction on the state's heavily used highways and bridges has outpaced revenues generated by the tax.

State transportation commissioner Jamie Fox told NJ Advance Media the lack of revenue in the transportation fund was the major reason for delayed or postponed roadwork within the Garden State for "a number of years."

"There's a lot of debt service, there is no doubt by either party in the decision," he said. "The transportation trust fund needs effective funding."

To solve that funding problem, Fox said, "decision makers" need to come up with a plan, and then it becomes a matter of getting "stakeholders," such as commuters, on board.

"If we don't do that, it's a failure on our parts to explain why we need to effectively fund (the transportation trust fund)," he said.

Kris Kolluri, the state transportation commissioner from 2006-2008, said he believed the "the time for a solution is ripe." Kolluri said he was "a little removed from the subject" — as he currently serves as CEO of Rowan University and Rutgers-Camden — but that he believed state policymakers such as Fox were poised to find a solution.

"The best hope that we have for getting this fixed right now is that they're not only furious policymakers, but they're pragmatic," Kolluri said.

A solution couldn't come soon enough for former assistant transportation commissioner Anthony Attanasio, because, he said, the state needs to stop playing "catch-up" with its roads.

As of late 2013, [the DOT said](#) 59 percent of the pavement it owns and maintains and 90 percent of bridges greater than 20 feet in length were in "acceptable condition." In terms of both pavement and bridges, an unacceptable condition of structural deficiency doesn't necessarily equate to unsafe, but it does relate "to the useful remaining life of the pavement and the optimal time for preservation and renewal," according to the DOT.

"If a bridge were deemed unsafe, the state would take immediate action to bring the bridge to a safe condition or close it to traffic," according to the DOT.

Prior to Gov. Chris Christie's administration, less than 50 percent of pavement on state roads was in acceptable condition, Attanasio said. Over the past five years, that number rose to its current level, but, he conceded, "it's still an unacceptable rating."

"We have not properly funded transportation, so we're constantly playing catch up," Attanasio said.

The state's goals with [its improvement plan](#) is to first bring 60 percent of its pavement into acceptable condition, but the long term goal is 80-percent acceptability by 2023.

That plan, however, doesn't have the funding. The transportation fund will only be able to pay its debt service on past projects at its current rate of funding from the gas tax, sales tax and tolls. Without changes to the funds' revenue stream, no cash will be available for new projects or local aid.

According to Fox, the DOT should be performing "many more major projects" in order to keep up with population growth and population shifts in the state.

"We should be doing bigger projects rather than just filling in potholes," he said.

Lawmakers have been exploring their options. State Assemblyman John Wisniewski (D-Middlesex), who held a series of meetings on how to replenish the fund, [has proposed a bill](#) that would raise the gas tax by at least 25 cents a gallon, bringing in an addition \$1.25 billion a year in revenue.

Meanwhile, state Sen. Raymond Lesniak (D-Union) [has also put forward a bill](#) that would raise the gas tax by 15 cents a gallon over a three-year period.

Gov. Chris Christie has resisted raising the tax since taking office in 2010, but said recently that "nothing is off the table."

[NJ Advance Media created an infographic](#) last week showing how the two controversial bills would impact commuters, who haven't welcomed the proposed tax hike.

Polls conducted by Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics have shown [a majority of those surveyed oppose raising the state's gas tax](#), though opposition has softened since this past spring.

AAA spokesperson Cathleen Lewis said commuters needed to become more invested in the debate and make routine road maintenance a priority — even if it means increasing the state gasoline tax.

"There is a sentiment out there that people don't want to spend any more money," Lewis said. "Politicians are always loathe to increase fees, but I think the commuters need to say, 'We understand that it's going to cost another 10 or 20 cents per gallon, but out of my pocket I've got to pay \$600 because my suspension and tires are damaged from potholes. I understand that it's worth it.'"

Attanasio said the only way to get motorists on board is to articulate the problem and to dedicate new revenue for capital investment.

"People would be more amenable to the tax if they knew the money was going," he said. "If you're a commuter and you're unhappy with your road quality, the only way to fix that is to invest in it,"

This, Attanasio said, would require reforming the system.

"You have to explore ideas about how to reform the system, about consolidation on a massive scale," he said. "You have to study whether there are duplicative services, or whether you have to have utility relocation. That's the kind of things we're talking about and need to tell motorists."

Most importantly, he said, the fund needed to address its debt problems since it's still paying off road projects completed decades ago.

"You don't want to be paying for projects 25 years down the road when you'll have to repave those roads two to three more times between then," Attanasio said. "It's like going out to dinner and having your kids pay the bill."

Justin Zaremba may be reached at jzaremba@njadvancemedia.com. Follow him on Twitter [@JustinZarembaNJ](https://twitter.com/JustinZarembaNJ). Find [NJ.com on Facebook](#).

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