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Louisiana roads get funding increase

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal has signed a bill into law that will gradually boost aid for roads and bridges throughout the state.

Before wrapping up a special session in March, House and Senate lawmakers overwhelmingly approved a bill touted by the governor to increase funding for transportation by \$636 million during the next five years. The revenue will be routed from the state treasury.

Supporters said the new law is needed to help address a \$14 billion backlog of road and bridge work. Critics said the new money for roads could come at the expense of higher education and health care.

The new law, previously SB11, gradually increases state highway funds by altering the state's operating budget. It takes the 4-cent state sales tax on car and truck sales and dedicates it to transportation projects. That money now is used for general governmental needs.

Transportation funding will get a 10 percent boost in the fiscal year that begins July 1. It will amount to \$42 million. The shift will increase to \$255 million per year by July 2012.

Once all funds are weaned from the treasury by July 2014, new aid for roads and bridges will reach \$320 million annually.

Sponsored by Sen. Mike Michot, R-Lafayette, the bill requires that 93 percent of the money be used highways. The other 7 percent will be used to help design and build large-scale projects.

The funding bill also speeds up the transfer of truck and trailer registration and licensing fees and taxes used for road work. The state's rural highway improvement program will get 75 percent of the fees starting July 1. The program was slated to receive 50 percent this summer.

The full \$40 million routed from the state's general expense fund to roads will be moved by July 2009 – a year ahead of the existing schedule.

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