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From the Denver Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/denver/news/2018/01/17/denver-chamber-breaks-from-other-business-groups.html>

Denver Chamber breaks from other business groups with transportation funding request

Jan 17, 2018, 2:59pm MST

Just five days after 21 business groups from across Colorado asked the Legislature to dedicate at least \$300 million a year in new money to transportation, the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce has asked legislative leaders for just half that much.

The chamber says it wants as much road funding as possible, but isn't sure how much is available to spend.

The letter seeking the same amount of money for transportation that Gov. John Hickenlooper requested in next year's budget arrived in many legislators' inboxes on the same day that Rep. Tim Leonard, R-Evergreen, said that he will introduce a second proposal to ask voters for permission sell as much as \$3.5 billion in bonds for highway improvements.

Leonard's bill is very similar to Senate Bill 1, the Senate Republican effort introduced on the opening day of the legislative session next week, but it puts no money toward transit and sets start dates for construction.

The letter and the new bill represent cracks, even if slight ones, in what had been a unified movement between business leaders and legislative Republicans to press officials to put a substantial amount to transportation from the increased tax revenues flowing into the state — new revenues that could be as great as \$1 billion between this fiscal year and the fiscal year that begins on July 1.

And especially with Hickenlooper pushing for the smaller, \$148 million allocation and House Speaker Crisanta Duran, D-Denver, not having identified how much of the new money she is willing to put toward transportation, it could make the work slightly harder for people trying to rally around a single



MILEHIGHTRAVELER VIA GETTY IMAGES

A traffic backup on westbound Interstate 70 heading into the Rocky Mountains.

solution.

“I would encourage that we speak with one voice on this because this is an ever-growing problem,” said Loren Furman, senior vice president of the Colorado Association of Commerce and Industry, which is supporting the \$300 million annual allocation sought in SB 1 but has asked legislators simply to put as much funding in next year’s budget toward transportation as possible. “We need to find funding solutions. And with this new money, it’s almost a gift horse and an opportunity to prioritize what the voters told us needs to be prioritized.”

In the letter sent late Tuesday afternoon to legislators, Denver Metro Chamber president/CEO Kelly Brough wrote that Coloradans lose between 10 and 50 hours a year in traffic and spend an average of \$1,200 a year in the form of additional vehicle operating costs, congestion-related delays and traffic crashes. The head of Colorado’s largest chamber of commerce said her members “strongly support” Hickenlooper’s request for a boost in one-time transportation funding in the 2018-19 budget and asked legislators to dedicate “at least \$148 million” to that aim.

Brough announced in September that her organization and others, including the Colorado Contractors Association, planned to seek a sales-tax boost for transportation on the November ballot.

On Wednesday, she said that even dedicating nearly \$150 million to transportation would not be enough to cut substantially into the roughly \$9 billion transportation-infrastructure funding backlog that the Colorado Department of Transportation has cited, and she noted that local roads also need help that wouldn’t be able to come through the state’s allocation of funding in SB 1, a bill on which the Denver Metro Chamber has yet to take a position.

“I don’t feel like necessarily we’re going lower (than the other business groups). We’re saying that \$148 million is a start, and we absolutely support it,” Brough said. “But we’re also asking: How much money realistically is available?”

That was the same question that Hickenlooper said he asked before arriving at his request for \$148.2 million in the 2018-19 fiscal year budget. Republican legislative leaders thanked him but quickly said that more needs to be done to make up for the state having spent just \$357.2 million from the general fund on transportation improvements since 2009, despite Colorado being a target of major immigration and organic growth.

Asked Tuesday about the request of the 21 chambers of commerce and business groups regarding \$300 million annual funding, he said he understands the need to ramp up transportation funding. But he noted — as Duran often does — that education continues to be underfunded as compared to the guidelines set forth by Amendment 23 of the Colorado Constitution, and he said that he is not willing to cut from other services to get more money to roads and highways.

“I’m in agreement that 300 million dollars is a good amount to put toward transportation. I don’t see it all coming from the general fund,” said the Democratic governor, who called on Thursday during his annual State of the State Address for Colorado residents to be able to vote on how much money they want to put toward roads and transit, likely through a November tax-hike proposal.

“Most legislators and most chambers of commerce are happy to call for money to be spent, but they’re a little more resistant when they see what would have to be cut. We’re talking way past flesh,

way past muscle and into bone," Hickenlooper said.

Sandra Hagen Solin, the spokeswoman for transportation-funding advocate and business-led interest group Fix Colorado Roads, argued Wednesday, however, that the new pot of money coming into the state from the rising economy and the federal tax-reform package means that, for once, legislative leaders don't have to choose between funding transportation and education. And to that end, she said it's imperative for business groups to work together to push for legislators to set aside enough in sustainable funding next year and into the future that they can take care of the top-tier CDOT projects — an amount that generally is accepted to be around \$3.5 billion.

Voters may be willing to pay more in taxes for roads, Solin said. But to convince them to do so, they have to see that the state has put all that it can from existing tax revenue into the area.

"It's important that legislators have a sense of where the business community is — and what chambers outside of the Denver Metro Chamber feel about transportation funding and its priority," Solin said.

Leonard's new bill, which is expected to be introduced late Wednesday afternoon, is another reinforcement of the Republican desire to commit at least \$300 million per year toward transportation funding, though he said it is something he worked on separately from House and Senate leaders. He said that he would be happy if parts of it were incorporated into SB 1 or vice versa — as long as the commitment is made.

Ed Sealoover

Reporter

Denver Business Journal

