

Group seeks big increase in road aid

BY WILL SENTELL

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A highway advocacy group is launching a campaign to increase state aid to roads and bridges by at least \$145 million per year.

Officials of Driving Louisiana Forward, which includes chambers of commerce statewide and other groups, said the state made strides earlier this year in tackling road problems.

Jennifer Marusak, spokeswoman for the group, said the new aid is well below the \$600 million per year needed to make a dent in the state's \$14 billion backlog of road and bridge needs. "We took a baby step," Marusak said. "It was a needed baby step, but we are nowhere near where we need to be."

Any such push is sure to trigger howls from state higher education and health-care leaders, who contend that special attention for highways could jeopardize their missions.

The key transportation bill approved earlier this year will boost state aid to highways by \$320 million per year by mid-2015.

Marusak said that, even under the most optimistic view, recent action means that the state will spend an extra \$470 million per year in seven years on roads.

Marusak said her group will ask that:

- State aid for highways be increased by \$85 million per year by using state general revenue, not the highway fund, to pay for retirement and health benefits for transportation employees.

- Highways get another \$60 million or so by claiming part of the state's excess mineral revenue.