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## Highway Report Card Time In Alabama

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If you've got kids in school, you'll understand when I say that this time of year (when they go back to school) is a time of mixed feelings.

On the one hand, it's "bravo!" time – and one reason, at least here at Hacienda Hudson, is that the return of school days means a dramatic drop in the weekly food bill. You see, if the kids are back in school, then they (and all their buddies) are not here eating us out of house and home. That means that there's at

least a little bit of food left in the refrigerator come dinner time, which in turn means that Chester the Sheepdog's odds of gobbling up a few under-the-table tidbits go up dramatically. Chester likes this plan. A lot.

But it's kind of sad, too, because we genuinely like having the kids and their friends around. We visit. We eat lunch. We talk and laugh and have a good time, and I really do hate to see the holidays end.

Besides, the resumption of school means one more thing too. It means it's time for homework...and grades...and, eventually, report cards...

### Alabama's Highway Report Card

Speaking of report cards, Alabama got one this week when TRIP, The Road Information Program, released "Making the Grade in Alabama: The Ability of Alabama's Transportation System to Meet the State's Need for Safe and Efficient Mobility." That's a long title, but it refers to a report card that gives a snapshot of how the state is faring in this day of tight funding and all that that implies.

The report's findings were presented Tuesday at a Birmingham press conference by Carolyn Bonifas, TRIP's associate director for research and communication. Info used to prepare the study comes from the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Texas Transportation Institute, and the Alabama Department of Transportation.

### So How Did Alabama's Highways Do?

The "subjects" on which the state was graded included roads, bridges, congestion, funding and safety. How did the state do? Well...

- In the roadway arena, the study concluded that, statewide, 13 percent of Alabama's major roads and highways have pavements in either poor (5 percent) or mediocre (8 percent) condition.
- Bridges fared even worse, percentage-wise, with about a quarter of the state's bridges (state, local, and municipal bridges 20 feet or longer) tagged as "structurally deficient or functionally obsolete."
- The study also revealed – not surprisingly – that population growth and increases in vehicle travel have led to increased congestion in the state's urban areas.
- Key safety related findings included the fact that from 2002 to 2006 an average of 1,106 persons were killed each year on Alabama roads – a rate 42 percent higher than the national average.
- Finally, the study noted that Alabama is facing a significant transportation funding shortfall, with the result that needed projects are not moving forward – in fact, it appears that the state faces a funding shortfall of about \$6.9 billion from 2008 to 2017.

### Metro Regional Report Cards

In addition to the statewide overview, TRIP evaluated conditions in four major metro areas in the state (Birmingham, Huntsville, Mobile and Montgomery) and assigned letter grades to each. Each metro area was graded in five categories (roads, bridges, congestion, safety and funding). Here's a summary of the results.

- In Birmingham, roads, bridges, and congestion each received a grade of C-minus, while safety and funding both earned an F.
- Huntsville fared slightly better than Birmingham, earning two C-pluses (in bridges and congestion), one C (in roads), but also receiving Fs in the areas of safety and funding.
- The Mobile area received one C-plus (congestion), one C (roads), one C-minus (bridges), and Fs in safety and funding.
- Montgomery received a C-plus in congestion and a C in bridges, but three Fs (in roads, safety and funding).

### What it Means

What do these grades mean?

"The deficiencies cited in this report are not a reflection of the effectiveness of state and local transportation agencies," the report notes, "but of a lack of adequate funding."

But we already knew that. Why haven't the funding providers figured it out too?

The complete report, as well as details of the four metro areas studied, can be found at [www.tripnet.org](http://www.tripnet.org).