

The Cullman Times

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Local road projects top national list of most needed for economic growth

[Tiffany Owens](#)



Tiffany Owes/The Cullman Times

Vehicles drive east along Alabama Highway 157 just past the intersection at U.S. 31 Monday

Have you got an extra \$108 million on you?

That's how much it would cost to fund three local road projects identified in a national study as among the most-needed in the state to spur economic development.

The widening of U.S. 278 (Alabama Highway 69) east of Cullman, Interstate 65 south of Dodge City to Blount County and Alabama 157 east from U.S. 31 all made the list.

TRIP, a nonprofit research group, found the 1.1-mile stretch on U.S. 278 East, from Fourth Avenue to College Hill Drive, has one of the state's highest traffic volume on a two-lane road. Roughly 17,000 vehicles travel through the area daily, according to ALDOT traffic count data.

TRIP's study reviewed the condition and use of state roads, highways and bridges and compiled the 50 most-needed highway improvements to support economic growth and quality of life.

"Many segments of Alabama's transportation system have significant deterioration, lack some desirable safety features, and do not have adequate capacity to provide the reliable mobility needed to support economic development, creating challenges for Alabama's residents, visitors, businesses and state and local governments," the report stated.

Landing at No. 16, the four-laning of U.S. 278 East is estimated to cost \$40 million.

"Commuters experience daily delays during peak periods. Added capacity will facilitate continued growth in the area, improve mobility and reduce traffic delays while enhancing safety," the report stated.

The project gained attention in the wake of the 2011 tornadoes but never came to fruition. This fall, Rep. Randall Shedd, R-Fairview, announced the project had new life and that right of way acquisition had begun.

Shedd told *The Times* the biggest priority was getting the project shovel-ready if funding became available. He also cited safety concerns and the potential economic benefits associated with opening a corridor between Cullman and Gadsden.

"The No. 1 goal is safety, and it's a huge safety issue," Shedd said in November. "Cullman is growing and it makes an impact. Beyond that, infrastructure is important to continue the economic well-being of the area. Personally, I believe a center lane on the existing four lane is needed, as traffic and business growth continues to increase there. All of this is very long-term, but you need to take that first step."

St. Bernard Abbey and Preparatory School has asked the state to add a new traffic light at its entrance on U.S. 278 as part of the widening project.

At No. 34 is the widening of a six-mile stretch of I-65, beginning 2.6 miles south of Alabama 69 to the Blount County line. The project is estimated to cost \$43,650,000. The study cited the route's new growth and frequent congestion, with around 40,000 vehicles traveling through the area daily.

"Traffic delays are increasing and safety is a concern. Added capacity will facilitate the continued growth, improve mobility and reduce traffic delays. Improved traffic flow should enhance the safety," the report stated.

The long-awaited four-laning of Alabama 157, from U.S. 31 to Alabama 69, came in at No. 45 on the list. More than 15,000 vehicles travel the 3.5-mile stretch daily. Highway 157 is a four-lane highway from Mississippi (via U.S. 72) through Florence but stops at the north end of Cullman.

"This road is a heavily traveled bypass around the City of Cullman. Current traffic levels justify adding the additional lanes. Widening to four lanes will ease congestion and reduce delays in traffic. The four-laning will enhance the economic potential for the route," the TRIP report stated.

Local legislators told *The Times* in August 2014 the Alabama Department of Transportation set a September 2016 completion date for the project, but without even being let for bids, that deadline will most certainly come and go without any progress.

TRIP evaluated each project based on the following criteria: short-term economic benefits, including job creation; the level of improvement in the condition of the transportation facility, including safety improvements; the degree of improvement in access and mobility; and the long-term improvement provided in regional or state economic performance and competitiveness.

The 50 projects TRIP identified would cost \$4.6 billion to complete.