Connecticut Roads Among the Nation's Worst, But Who Pays to Fix Them?

Gary Stoller | 05/16/17

Connecticut “clearly has a significantly higher share of poor roads” than other states, says Rocky Moretti, TRIP’s director of policy and research.

Broken pavement on Legion Avenue in New Haven

Pavement in poor condition has “advanced deterioration” and can cause additional wear or damage to vehicle suspensions, wheels and tires, the Federal Highway Administration says. It can also cause delays, the agency says, when vehicles slow for potholes or rough surfaces, affect vehicles’ stopping ability and maneuverability, and lead to accidents.

According to TRIP, which is based in Washington, 57 percent of Connecticut's major roads are in poor condition, and driving on roads in need of repair costs state motorists $2.2 billion annually in extra vehicle repairs and operating costs.

The DOT, which resurfaces about 250 miles of pavement annually, says state-maintained roads are getting a bum rap, and only a tiny percentage are in poor condition. Poor conditions on Connecticut's rural roads that are maintained by cities, towns and villages lower the overall rankings of the state's roads, agency spokesman Kevin Nursick says.

Connecticut has more than 20,000 miles of public roadways, and about half were built more than 55 years ago. About 80 percent of the miles are maintained by cities, towns and villages, and 3,734 miles, including major highways, are maintained by the state. Besides pavement conditions, traffic congestion is another concern. Sixty percent of Connecticut’s urban interstates experience congestion during peak hours, TRIP says.

Though funding is still in doubt, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and the DOT two years ago unveiled a 30-year, $100 billion plan, Let’s Go CT, to upgrade Connecticut’s roads and bridges while modernizing, improving and expanding Connecticut’s transportation infrastructure. In a 2015 report outlining the project, Malloy wrote that “an aging infrastructure, traffic congestion and long-delayed planning have placed our economy and our quality of life at risk.”

Every year, Malloy wrote, drivers spend up to one work week stuck in traffic, costing nearly $1.6 billion in lost time and fuel and a greater amount “in higher operating costs, fuel and accidents caused by deficient, congested roads and bridges.”

Malloy’s press secretary, Chris Collibee, says the state “underinvested in its transportation system for the past several decades.

“While other states were expanding and building new roads and mass-transportation systems, Connecticut sat idle,” he says.

“Under the leadership of Gov. Malloy, our state has taken the first steps in reversing those decades of neglect. The current condition of our transportation networks did not happen overnight, and reversing those decades of neglect will take time.”

Connecticut faces challenges, says Baruch Feigenbaum, the Los Angeles-based Reason Foundation’s assistant director of transportation policy, because it has “older-than-average infrastructure and wet, cold weather” that wears infrastructure more quickly.

“However, this is not an excuse for the state to perform as poorly as it does in pavement and bridge quality, expenditures and congestion,” Feigenbaum says. “Connecticut DOT must do better.”

TRIP’s analysis of 2015 Federal Highway Administration data shows that, besides 57 percent of the state’s major roads in poor condition, 22 percent are in mediocre condition, 11 percent in fair condition and 10 percent in good condition. Those numbers include both state-maintained and locally maintained roads.

DOT argues organizations citing a substantial percentage of Connecticut roads in poor condition use a different — and problematic — rating system than the one it uses. Looking at only state-maintained roads, Nursick says, the rating system used by DOT shows 45 percent of state-maintained roads in fair condition, 41 percent in good condition, 12 percent in excellent condition and 2 percent in poor condition.

A September 2016 report by the Reason Foundation also put Connecticut’s roads in a very negative light. The report tracked the performance of the 50 state-owned highway systems and ranked them in 11 categories including pavement conditions, deficient bridges, traffic congestion, fatality rates, and administrative and maintenance costs per mile.
Connecticut ranked 44th in the nation — or seventh worst — in highway performance and cost-effectiveness. Neighboring states, Nursick says, “are in the same overall range, so it’s clearly a regional issue, not DOT doing something out-in-left-field wrong.”

Other factors that may contribute to Connecticut’s low ranking, he says, are a higher cost of living and more road traffic that increases congestion costs and repair costs. “There’s more traffic to work around as we work on the roads,” Nursick says.

**Urban Roads**

Nearly a third of the nation’s major urban roads — interstates, freeways and other arterial routes — have pavements that are in “substandard condition” and “provide an unacceptably rough ride to motorist,” according to a TRIP report released in November. And Connecticut has its own unfavorable niche: three of the nation’s top 25 large urban areas with the highest share of roads in poor condition.

Sixty-one percent of Connecticut’s urban roads are in poor condition, 19 percent in mediocre condition, 9 percent in fair condition and 11 percent in good condition, according to TRIP’s analysis of 2014 Federal Highway Administration survey data.

TRIP ranks the pavement in the Bridgeport-Stamford area as the worst in New England — and sixth-worst in the USA — among urban regions with a population of at least 500,000 people.

Fifty-five percent of the pavement on major roads and highways in that area is in poor condition and provides a rough ride, the transportation research group says.

That’s not surprising news to Connecticut motorist Laurie DeAngelis, who says “the I-95 corridor in Bridgeport is horrible,” especially northbound.

“If you start at about Exit 26 and then go through Bridgeport and Stratford, it is one pothole and/or car part after another,” says DeAngelis, a Newtown resident. “It is especially rough over the bridges. I have gotten to the point where I try to avoid that area altogether.”

The rough roads in the Bridgeport-Stamford area cost the average motorist an additional $797 annually in vehicle maintenance costs, according to TRIP. That expense is the highest of all urban regions in New England and No. 9 nationally, the group says.

DeAngelis compares pavement conditions on I-95 in the Bridgeport-area roads to those on I-84 outside Hartford.

“If you are traveling north of Hartford on I-84, you can barely find a pothole, and there are more lanes and a carpool lane,” she says. “The I-95 corridor in Bridgeport is horrible compared to I-84 north of Hartford. We pay the most taxes in the state in Fairfield County, and our roads are the worst. Go figure.”

DOT’s rating system shows no pavement on interstate roads in poor condition, Nursick says.

“The DOT does not base transportation-infrastructure decisions on who or what area of the state pays more taxes than another,” he says. “Some of the factors we consider are needs, deficiencies, existing conditions and life-cycle analysis.”

TRIP places two other urban areas in Connecticut on its national list of 25 worst for pavement conditions. New Haven ranks 14th worst with 47 percent of major roads and highways in poor condition, and Hartford 25th worst with 38 percent in poor condition. The group also says the Springfield, Massachusetts, area, which includes both Massachusetts and northern Connecticut roads, ranks 22nd worst with 39 percent in poor condition.

The New Haven area’s rough roads cost the average motorist an additional $728 annually, TRIP says. That’s the second-highest expense in New England and $48 more yearly than Boston motorists pay for rough roads in their area.

Besides pavement condition, traffic congestion is another major problem in Connecticut. The state has the busiest urban interstates in New England and the third busiest — behind No. 1 California and No. 2 Maryland — in the U.S., TRIP says.

With 60 percent of its urban interstates considered congested, Connecticut is tied with Hawaii for seventh-worst congestion in the USA, the group says. Two neighboring states — Rhode Island and Massachusetts — are slightly more congested on their urban interstates.

**Rural Roads**

Nearly 40 percent of Connecticut’s rural roads are in poor condition, 34 percent in mediocre condition, 17 percent in fair condition and 11 percent in good condition, according to TRIP’s analysis of 2015 Federal Highway Administration data.

The Reason Foundation ranks Connecticut 44th of 50 states in pavement conditions on rural roads and 24th in pavement conditions on rural interstate roads.

Connecticut’s rural roads received some unwanted publicity two years ago when a TRIP analysis of federal accident data revealed they had the deadliest fatality rate in the nation. The state, however, incorrectly filled out crash forms and mistakenly included urban fatalities, TRIP’s Moretti says.

Connecticut’s non-interstate rural fatality rates are below the national average, he says.
according to the American Society of Civil Engineers. Vehicular restrictions on functionally obsolete bridges “contribute to traffic congestion” and “affect safe and efficient personal mobility and movement of goods and services,” the engineers say. “The restrictions may also result in such major inconveniences as school buses taking lengthy detours and increased response times for emergency vehicles required to use alternate routes.”

Connecticut’s bridges, says the Reason Foundation’s Feigenbaum, are “in much-worse-than-average condition.” Pennsylvania and other states with low rankings “have taken innovative steps to prioritize deficient bridges, including entering into a public-private partnership,” he says. “Connecticut needs to look at various innovative ways to improve its bridges.”

Infrastructure reports, including the one done by the Reason Foundation, often knock Connecticut, Nursick says, because of its number of functionally obsolete bridges. Such a designation “has no bearing on condition,” he says. Connecticut’s bridges are “not too bad and generally improving.”

The Future

Collibee, Malloy’s press secretary, says the governor recognizes that the state’s transportation system is a priority. “Transportation is too important to our future,” Collibee says. “If we want to grow jobs and attract businesses, we must make our infrastructure best-in-class. Infrastructure is one of the top issues facing our state, and we have a $100 billion plan to tackle it.”

That 30-year plan calls for $5.4 billion to maintain the pavement and have no state-maintained roads in poor condition. And, among other road, bridge, rail and transportation projects, the plan calls for $18.7 billion to maintain bridges and ensure that less than 10 percent are structurally deficient. Finding the huge amount of money needed to start and complete the projects, though, may be a daunting task. Last year, a nine-member Transportation Finance Panel created by Malloy recommended various ways to fund the project, including implementing tolls and raising sales and gasoline taxes. The most recent two-year budget, though, was unveiled by Malloy in February and includes no monies to fund the transportation initiative beyond 2020, when startup money will be depleted.

Connecticut traditionally depends on gas-tax revenues to fund highway and transportation projects, but that revenue source has been declining. Gas prices have dropped, and an increasing number of motorists are using more fuel-efficient vehicles and electric cars. The Yankee Institute for Public Policy says the many proposed projects in the plan need to be prioritized, and some “wish-list” projects, such as a rail line to Springfield, should be eliminated.

“Too many Connecticut projects fail to distinguish between needs and wants,” says the institute’s Liebau. “We need Metro-North to serve more than 100,000 people a day as they commute to New York City. We don’t need a $1 billion rail line to Springfield for 2,000 people. At half a million dollars per commuter, that’s an expensive luxury for a state that’s running out of money.”

Transportation advocates were unable to get on the November election ballot a “lockbox” proposal that would prohibit the Connecticut General Assembly from using the state’s special transportation fund for non-transportation projects. Such a lockbox is needed, Malloy said, before new revenue sources are created to fund the 30-year transportation plan.