

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

Gary Stoller | 05/16/17



Hitting bump after bump, cars and trucks are repeatedly jolted as they head east on Interstate 84 between Brookfield's Exit 9 and Newtown's Exit 10.

The pavement on this stretch of highway — rated in “fair” condition by the [state Department of Transportation](#) — is cracked, pockmarked and sunken.

Many Connecticut motorists bemoan the blacktop conditions on numerous other areas of the state's roads, which are ranked by various organizations as some of the worst in the nation.

“Connecticut's people suffer every day in traffic and endure potentially dangerous conditions because our roads, bridges and highways are in disrepair,” says Carol Platt Liebau, the president of the [Yankee Institute for Public Policy](#), a conservative think tank in Hartford.

Three other organizations — the national transportation research group [TRIP](#), the [Reason Foundation](#) think tank and the [American Society of Civil Engineers](#) — analyzed federal government data and concluded in separate studies that nearly all states' roads are in better condition than those in Connecticut.

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 rates 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 motorists,” 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.



The I-91 bridge by North Front Street and the

Quinnipiac River near Bailey Street and Middletown Avenue in New Haven, one the state’s most-traveled structurally deficient bridges.

Bridges

Connecticut has 5,300 bridges, including about 4,000 owned and maintained by the DOT. Nursick says 270 of the state-maintained bridges and 159 of those maintained by cities, towns and villages are structurally deficient.

Structurally deficient bridges, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers, have “deteriorated structural components” and may either be closed or have speed and weight limits. Though structurally deficient bridges are “not necessarily unsafe,” they must be inspected regularly because “critical load-carrying elements” are in poor condition and “require significant maintenance, rehabilitation or replacement,” the engineers say.

The Federal Highway Administration oversees the National Bridge Inspection program, which calls for regular assessments of public vehicular bridges more than 20 feet in length to ensure safety.

The agency’s 2016 data, according to TRIP, shows that, of 4,214 state and locally maintained bridges in Connecticut in the program, 338, or 8 percent, are structurally deficient. The average for all 50 states is 9 percent. (TRIP’s data is based on the Federal Highway Administration’s inventory of bridges at least 20 feet in length, which likely accounts for the DOT’s larger total of bridges.)

According to an American Road & Transportation Builders Association analysis of Federal Highway Administration data, the West River Bridge — with 150,600 daily crossings — is Connecticut’s most traveled structurally deficient bridge. The bridge, which is on Interstate 95 between New Haven and West Haven, was built in 1957. Farther west, the Yankee Doodle Bridge, which is on I-95 and spans the Norwalk River and was built in 1958, handles about 5,000 fewer daily crossings and ranks No. 2 on the list of most traveled structurally deficient bridges. Of the top 10 bridges, eight are on I-95 and I-91, while two are on I-84.

Connecticut has a much greater number of bridges — 1,001 of the 4,000 DOT-maintained bridges — that are functionally obsolete, Nursick says. An additional 286 owned by local municipalities also fall into that category. A bridge is classified as functionally obsolete if its design is outdated. It may have lower load-carrying capacity, narrower lanes or shoulders or less clearance underneath than bridges built to current standards.

Many bridges were built decades ago, many get high traffic volume, and the state often gets harsh winter weather — “a tough scenario for the longevity of bridges,” Nursick says. “The long-term cumulative effect of those things can’t be denied.”

While functionally obsolete bridges are not necessarily unsafe, they have older design features and must have limits for speed and weight to ensure safe operation of vehicles,

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.