Report: Maryland interstate highways second most congested in U.S.

By Patti Borda Mullins
pmullins@newspost.com

Staff Photo by Dan Gross

Tuesday evening rush hour traffic on I-70 westbound seen from New Design Road. Interstate 270 was on a list of congested roads long before a national transportation group reported Monday about Maryland’s level of interstate congestion.

But the group reinforced what most Frederick County motorists know. Only California has worse urban interstate traffic congestion than Maryland, according to The Road Information Program, or TRIP, a Washington-based national transportation organization. TRIP found that 75 percent of Maryland’s urban interstate highways are congested during peak hours, the second-highest rate in the nation. California was at 85 percent.

“That’s really no surprise,” said Charlie Gischlar, Maryland State Highway Administration spokesman.

TRIP reported that the 10 states with the greatest share of their urban interstate highways considered congested are California, Maryland, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Delaware, Massachusetts, Hawaii, Connecticut, Florida and Minnesota.

TRIP is a 35-year-old nonprofit coalition whose members are made up of insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, businesses involved in highway and transit engineering, and labor unions.

Life choices affect traffic flow

Given Maryland’s location in the middle of the Mid-Atlantic, its proximity to the nation’s capital, and abundance of tourist destinations, some congestion is to be expected, and the State Highway Administration is working on it, Gischlar said.

Maryland’s interstates also have the second-highest rate of daily vehicle travel per urban lane mile in the U.S., the TRIP report found. That, too, is understandable, given people’s choice to buy homes in more rural places such as Frederick County, and working in jobs close to D.C. and Baltimore, Gischlar said. “Then they commute,” he said. “Like your Frederick effect.”

Kevin Boyer, of Hagerstown, takes Interstate 70 to Baltimore frequently, and finds the commute a mixed bag. “Well sometimes it sucks on I-70; sometimes not,” he said in a Facebook message to The News-Post.

Nontraditional commuting options, such as telecommuting, carpooling and four-day workweeks, can help ease congestion, Gischlar said. Meanwhile, the agency tackles maintenance and new construction needs with a budget of about $2 billion a year.

Gischlar said the SHA keeps an eye out for innovative solutions. For example, the bidding process has already begun on a $100 million project to improve I-270. Gischlar said the open-ended request asked bidders to come up with a plan “to move the most vehicles the fastest and farthest.”

The solution that emerges may be ready for design and building next spring, he estimated.

“That is innovation that will help the problem of congestion,” Gischlar said.

Numbers keep going up

TRIP’s report, “The Interstate Highway System Turns 60: Challenges to Its Ability to Continue to Save Lives, Time and Money,” came out the week that the Interstate Highway System turns 60. The highway system faces unprecedented levels of travel — particularly by large trucks — and insufficient funding to make needed repairs and improvements, TRIP concluded.

Still, TRIP credits interstates with higher levels of safety than roads built with fewer, narrower lanes and no median. Nationwide, the fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel on the interstate in 2014 was .54, compared with 1.26 on non-interstate routes.

In Maryland, the non-interstate fatality rate was more than three times as high as the interstate fatality rate:.99 versus .32. TRIP estimates that the Interstate Highway System saved 5,359 lives nationwide in 2014 and 114 lives in Maryland.

The Interstate Highway System represents 2.5 percent of lane miles in the U.S., and yet carries 25 percent of the nation’s vehicle travel.

“A[An] aging Interstate system will increasingly require more long-term, costly repairs,” TRIP stated.

Economic health comes into play too, according to Jim Russ, president of the Maryland Transportation Builders & Materials Association, who issued a statement via TRIP.

“The functioning of Maryland’s Interstate Highway System is absolutely critical to the health of Maryland’s economy,” Russ said.

“Future transportation investment levels in Maryland must be adequate to make further improvements to the state’s most vital highways, which will improve personal and commercial mobility in the state.”

The Interstate Highway System needs $189 billion in repairs, estimated by the U.S. Department of Transportation. TRIP estimated that the nation’s current transportation investment is less than two-thirds of the amount needed to keep interstates in good condition and make the necessary improvements.

Federal taxes on gasoline have not been raised since 1993.

Federal funding lacks a long-term, sustainable revenue source, TRIP stated.

TRIP reported that 43 percent of urban interstate highways are considered congested during peak hours, and the average annual amount of travel per interstate lane mile increased by 11 percent from 2000 to 2014.

Across the nation, travel by combination trucks on the interstates increased by 29 percent from 2000 to 2014, more than double the 14 percent rate of growth for all interstate vehicle travel during the same period.

On U.S. routes and interstates in Frederick County and beyond, the State Highway Administration has projects to improve traffic flow. Crews are working on I-70 bridges in Washington County, over Beaver Creek and over the ramp to westbound Interstate 68.

In Howard County, I-70 is getting resurfaced between Marriottsville Road and the Baltimore County line.

“We have a lot going on,” Gischlar said. “We are definitely attacking congestion. ... We’re trying to address congestion and safety.”

Follow Patti Borda Mullins on Twitter @FNP_Patti