

The Times and Democrat



THURSDAY, JUNE 29, 2016

Highway deaths alone enough to spur action

The good news this holiday weekend is that gas prices are falling during a period when motorists traditionally expect increases.

GasBuddy.com predicts this Independence Day will have the cheapest gasoline since 2005 at an average \$2.27 a gallon nationwide. In South Carolina, according to AAA Carolinas, the price is even lower at an average of \$2, 43 cents less than one year ago.

The good news doesn't end there. Looking forward to the rest of 2016, GasBuddy projects the return of a sub-\$2-per-gallon national average as soon as early November.

Not surprisingly, the lower fuel costs are contributing to more travel this summer.

AAA projects nearly 1.8 million people in South and North Carolina will travel this Fourth of July weekend. This represents the highest travel volume on record for the Independence Day period, which is defined as Thursday, June 30, to Monday, July 4.

"We are well on our way for 2016 to be a record-breaking year for summertime travel," said Dave Parsons, AAA Carolinas president and CEO. "This trend is welcome news for the travel industry and a sign that Carolinians are taking to our nation's highways and skies like never before."

The unwelcome reality of more travel is the price being paid in lost human lives.

As of June 26, 442 people have died on South Carolina highways, just four shy of the 446 deaths during the same period in 2015. The number, tragically, puts the state nearly on pace to match a 2015 toll that was up 15 percent from 2014. More than 950 people were killed on S.C. roads a year ago.

For Orangeburg County, the situation is even worse. The county has 17 deaths so far in 2016, up two from this time a year ago. The state's second largest county in land area, Orangeburg has the deadly combination of vast miles of rural roads and the most interstate miles of any county.

And though a majority of deaths occur on roads other than interstates, a recent report indicates South Carolina's interstates are among the deadliest in the nation.

TRIP, a Washington-based national transportation organization, reports that during 2014, there were .82 fatalities for every 100 million miles traveled on interstates in South Carolina. That ranks the state sixth in deadliest interstate highways. New Mexico has the highest rate at 1.26 fatalities.

Things stand to get worse despite the design of interstates – which include a separation from other roads and rail lines, a minimum of four lanes, paved shoulders and median barriers – making the roads more than twice as safe to travel on as all other roadways. Nationwide, the fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel on the interstate in 2014 was 0.54, compared to 1.26 on non-interstate routes. In South Carolina the non-interstate fatality rate was more than double the interstate rate – 1.98 vs. 0.82. TRIP estimates the interstate system saved 5,359 lives nationwide in 2014 and 165 lives in South Carolina.

But travel on interstates is increasing two times faster than new lane capacity is being added, according to TRIP. As a result, 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. Thirty-nine percent of

South Carolina's urban interstates are congested during peak travel times.

In 2015, vehicle miles on the interstates were 4 percent higher than in 2014 and through the first three months of 2016, travel on the interstates was 5 percent higher than during the first three months of 2015.

Lower gas prices and more people traveling make it hard for South Carolina – and the nation as a whole – to keep up with highway improvements. But repairing and improving interstates and other roads are priorities.

"While the dramatic increase in South Carolina's population in recent years – an astounding 39 percent since 1990 – has been good for our economy, the lack of investment in our state's transportation needs is having the opposite effect," said Bill Ross, executive director of the South Carolina Alliance to Fix Our Roads. "If we do not increase investments in our highway system, the tourism industry, businesses and manufacturing plants are not going to locate or expand here in South Carolina. The future of our state's economic growth, thriving tourism industry and, most importantly, the well-being of our citizens are at risk unless adequate and long-term funding is provided to meet the growing demands of our highway system."

South Carolina lawmakers recently took a big step toward beginning the process of repairing roads and bridges in the state, but even the most optimistic among the state's leaders acknowledge there are many proverbial miles to go in the process of bringing the transportation system up to par.

Reports aside, the death toll alone should be enough to spur action by lawmakers to find a permanent and sustainable way to make the state's roads and highways as safe as possible.