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Report: SouthCoast roads cost drivers \$1,600 a year on average

According to a national transportation research group, road conditions in the region mean hefty repair bills for local drivers



JOHN SLADEWSKI/THE STANDARD-TIMES

This series of patched potholes and indentations in Purchase Street act like a series of small speed bumps that wreak havoc on the suspension and wheel alignment of automobiles.

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Driving on SouthCoast roads costs an average of \$1,608 a year in maintenance, fuel costs and accident repair, according to research from a transportation group.

TRIP, a research organization based in Washington, D.C., released a report Tuesday on transportation across Massachusetts, saying SouthCoast is the cheapest in the state for motorists in some categories, but the most expensive in another — safety.

“Per capita, this region has a very high rate of motor vehicle accidents,” said Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP, during a stop at the New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce Tuesday. “It’s beyond our report to say why, but this area has a very high traffic fatality rate.”

The area got better marks in vehicle operating or maintenance costs and congestion, though: SouthCoast motorists spend \$429 a year on average in maintenance due to poor road conditions, compared to \$541 in the Worcester area and \$514 in greater Springfield.

SouthCoast drivers pay \$425 in congestion costs, such as fuel after being stuck in traffic, considerably less than \$1,147 in Greater Boston and \$677 in Worcester.

Safety issues cost SouthCoast car owners \$754 a year, more than any other area of Massachusetts.

Stephen Smith, executive director of the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District, said the safety costs are due to high-risk areas, which SRPEDD documents in its annual list of the 100 most dangerous SouthCoast intersections. He cited the intersection of Ashley Boulevard and Wood Street in New Bedford as an example. In 2002, Smith said, the corner was listed as 19th most dangerous in the region. After improvements, it didn’t even make the top 100 list by 2010.

The report is another example why infrastructure funding is crucial, Smith said, supporting Question 1 on the state ballot in November. That question asks voters whether they would repeal the automatic gas tax increase tied to inflation, which he said would take needed funding away from transportation in Massachusetts.

Roy Nascimento, president and CEO of the New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce, which hosted Moretti, said “There’s no region of the state that needs funding more than this one.” He listed SouthCoast Rail as well as the port and airport as needing money.

According to the report, just 2 percent of SouthCoast roads are in “poor” condition, with 86 percent in “mediocre” condition — the lowest percentage of poorly-maintained roads in the state. Eleven percent of the bridges in SouthCoast are structurally deficient, the report said, including Dartmouth’s Padanaram Bridge, the New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge and several I-195 overpasses in New Bedford.

MassDOT said improvement to the I-195 bridges in New Bedford started this month as part of a two-year project. New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell has called for replacement of the century-old New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge to make way for development of the northern section of the harbor. In Dartmouth, Department of Public Works Director David Hickox said the Padanaram Bridge and its adjoining causeway are slated to have significant repairs and reconstruction starting with advertising for the bids in September 2015.

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