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FRONT PAGE

W.VA. ROADS REPORT 'ALARMING'

Drivers spend \$1.4B on additional repairs from poor conditions each year, report says

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F. BRIAN FERGUSON | Gazette-Mail photos

W.Va. 61 near Page, in Fayette County, is down to one lane on Thursday. West Virginia's poor roads cost drivers \$1.4 billion a year in additional vehicle repair and maintenance costs, crashes where road deficiencies are a contributing factor and lost time and fuel from traffic congestion, according to a report from TRIP, a D.C.-based nonprofit.

Poor roads cost the average Charleston driver \$1,357 a year in additional expenses, according to the latest TRIP report on West Virginia roads.

Statewide, deficient roads cost West Virginia drivers \$1.4 billion a year for additional vehicle repair and maintenance costs, crashes where road deficiencies are a contributing factor, and lost time and fuel from traffic congestion, the report from the national transportation association concludes.

"The quality of life of state residents, visitors and businesses is significantly affected by the quality of the state's road and bridge network," Will Wilkins, TRIP's executive director, said during a news conference Thursday to release the latest report on state roads.

In what has become something of a tradition during legislative sessions, the TRIP report outlines the costs of deficient roads and bridges on the state's economy and quality of life. The release of the report frequently coincides with the annual West Virginians for Better Transportation rally at

the Capitol, scheduled this year for Friday morning.

In past years, the call for additional funding for highway construction and maintenance has gone unheeded, but the advocates this year have an ally in Gov. Jim Justice, who wants to sell \$2.8 billion in road bonds to build and upgrade West Virginia's highways.

On Thursday, Justice administration Transportation Secretary Tom Smith called the TRIP report "alarming."

"Roads are getting worse. Bridges are getting worse," he said. "It really makes the point Governor Justice has asked us to make."

In his State of the State address, Justice proposed the massive highways construction program through bond sales that would be financed through a \$20 increase in the annual license plate renewal fee, a 10-cent a gallon increase in the state gasoline tax (estimated to cost average drivers about \$130 a year), and a \$1 increase in tolls on the West Virginia Turnpike.



TOP: W.Va. 61 near Page, in Fayette County, is down to one lane on Thursday. **ABOVE:** The Eugene Carter Memorial Bridge, in Charleston, could be among state bridges that are in need of repair. The annual TRIP report released Thursday noted that 17 percent of West Virginia's bridges are rated as structurally deficient, which is fifth worst, nationally.

Justice called the proposal the "800-pound gorilla" of his legislative agenda, saying it will create 48,000 jobs and cause an explosion in growth for the state's tourism industry.

Smith said Thursday it is important to invest now in upgrading highways, paraphrasing Justice by saying, "The longer you wait, the behinder you get."

Besides expense — the TRIP study found that West Virginia drivers spend an average

of \$647 a year on additional vehicle maintenance and repair costs — poor road conditions contribute to traffic accident and fatality rates that are significantly above national averages, it found.

Citing data from the Federal Highway Administration, the TRIP study noted that 29 percent of major roadways in West Virginia are in poor condition, with 55 percent rated mediocre or fair.

Notably, in one of TRIP's earlier reports, in 2004, 10 percent of the state's roads were rated in poor condition, and 26 percent were in fair condition.

The report released Thursday also notes that 17 percent of bridges in the state are rated as structurally deficient, which is fifth worst, nationally.

Founded in 1971, TRIP is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group supported by manufacturing, insurance, construction, labor and engineering organizations. The group's name is not an acronym.

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