

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2017

New report says poor roads cost WV drivers \$1.4 billion



The Department of Transportation budget for paving and secondary road maintenance comes to \$54 million. Another \$100 million is set aside for interstate construction

By [JAMES E. CASTO](#) For the [State Journal](#)

Each year TRIP, a national nonprofit research group, issues a state-by-state report on the nation's deteriorating highways and bridges. The newly released 2017 report says West Virginia's inadequate transportation system "costs West Virginia motorists a total of \$1.4 billion every year in the form of additional vehicle operating costs (VOC), congestion-related delays and traffic crashes."

Researchers who compiled the TRIP report said poor roads cost the average motorist in Morgantown \$1,439 a year. Similar loss figures were offered for Charleston (\$1,357), Wheeling (1,315), Parkersburg (\$1,274) and Huntington (\$1,121).

"The people always pay today for the leadership failures of the past," said Eldon A. Callen, vice president for government affairs and community and economic development for the Greater Morgantown Area Chamber of Commerce. "This is the stark reality demonstrated by this report."

"The question before us now is whether today's leadership will address basic infrastructure needs of our state or again kick it down the road. We are paying dearly in money and lives for poor roads. We would pay a lot less for good roads."

The report found that 29 percent of West Virginia's major roads are in poor condition while 55 percent are in mediocre or fair condition and only 17 percent are in good condition.

Moreover, according to the report, West Virginia has the nation's fifth-highest share of poor bridges, with 17 percent of the state's bridges rated structurally deficient. This ranking is up from 12th in 2014, when 13 percent of the state's bridges were rated structurally deficient.

The report says the state's major urban roads are becoming increasingly congested, with drivers wasting significant amounts of time and fuel each year.

Traffic crashes in West Virginia claimed the lives of 1,548 people between 2011 and 2015. The TRIP report says West Virginia's 2015 overall traffic fatality rate of 1.35 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel was significantly higher than the national average of 1.13. The fatality rate on West Virginia's rural non-Interstate roads was 2.24 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel, nearly three times higher than the 0.81 fatality rate on all other roads and highways in the state.

"These conditions are only going to get worse, increasing the additional costs to motorists, if greater investment is not made available at the state and local levels of government," said Will Wilkins, TRIP's executive director. "Without adequate funding, West Virginia's roads and bridges will become increasingly deteriorated and congested, hampering economic growth and quality of life of the state's residents."

Transportation Secretary Tom Smith called the report "alarming" and said it "really makes the point Gov. (Jim) Justice has asked us to make."

In his State of the State address, Justice called for a major highway construction bond issue to be financed by a \$20 increase in the annual license plate renewal fee, a 10-cent per gallon increase in the state's gasoline tax and a \$1 increase in tolls on the West Virginia Turnpike. His proposal faces an uncertain fate at the hands of the Republican-controlled Legislature, where there is strong opposition to any tax increase.

"West Virginia must have a modern transportation system to be able to respond to the competitive demands of a growing U.S. economy over the next decade," said Carol Fulks, executive director of the West Virginia Hospitality & Travel Association and chair of West Virginians for Better Transportation. "Tourism, economic development, jobs and safety are dependent upon a good transportation system. Our surrounding states are building and fixing their roads. It is time for West Virginia to do the same."

Founded in 1971, TRIP (The Road Information Program) is a private, nonprofit organization that researches, evaluates and distributes economic and technical data on surface transportation issues. TRIP is sponsored by insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, distributors and suppliers, businesses involved in highway and transit engineering and construction, labor unions, and organizations concerned with an efficient and safe surface transportation network that promotes economic development and quality of life.