

Lack of funding gives majority of vital transportation projects the red light

Article by: [TIM HARLOW](#), Star Tribune



Only one of 20 transportation improvements needed to relieve congestion, improve safety and support future growth in the metro area has adequate funding and more than half don't have funding allocated at all, according to a new report out Wednesday from TRIP, a national transportation research and advocacy group in Washington D.C.

In its report "[Project Green Light: Moving Minnesota's Top Transportation Improvements Forward](#)," TRIP looked at the state of 20 projects it identified as vital for improving the roads and bridges, mass transit, rail lines and facilities for bicyclists and pedestrians and rated them with a green, yellow or red light based on whether money is currently available or is anticipated to be within the next five years.

A \$33 million project to re-deck and repair the Central Avenue bridge over the Mississippi River in downtown [Minneapolis](#) got the lone green light for [metro area projects](#) while five were rated a yellow light because either a portion of needed funding is anticipated to be available by 2019 or the funding is uncertain while and 14 projects are rated a red light because funding is not currently available and, under current funding forecasts, is not anticipated to be available through 2019.

The report also said only six of the 30 critically needed transportation [projects in Greater Minnesota](#) have a green light, while three projects were rated a yellow light 21 projects were given a red light.

"We call our report Project Green Light, but unfortunately we live in a red light environment," said Rocky Moretti, TRIP's director of research and policy who presented the findings at the news conference Wednesday to lawmakers at the State Office Building in St. Paul.

Among the metro projects that lack full funding or have none dedicated at all include:

- Re-decking the I-35W bridge over the Minnesota River in [Bloomington](#)
- The Metro Green line from Minneapolis to the southwest suburbs
- Extending the Metro Blue Line through the northwest suburbs
- Pavement repairs and adding a MnPASS lane on I-94 between Minneapolis and St. Paul
- Adding a MnPASS lane on I-35W from downtown Minneapolis to Hwy. 36 and then north to Hwy. 10 through [Roseville](#), Arden Hills and Mounds View.
- A new bus rapid transit line along I-35W from downtown Minneapolis to [Burnsville](#)

Tackling these and other needs will be difficult since most of Minnesota's currently available transportation funding is already being used to address critical preservation needs on the state's transportation system, leaving inadequate resources to adequately maintain all of the system or address needed improvements and expansion, the report said.

Compounding the problem is the uncertainty of federal funding. The Highway Account of the federal Highway Trust Fund is expected to drop below \$1 billion later this year, and if it does that will trigger delays in federal reimbursement to Minnesota for road, highway and bridge projects. If Congress does not address the looming shortfall, funding for Minnesota highway and transit improvements could be cut by \$695 million for next fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1.

The dire situation is hardly unique to Minnesota, Moretti said. TRIP has produced similar reports for several other states, and the results mirror what is happening here.

"The solutions will have to come from the state level, they are not coming from Washington," he said. "The money isn't there."

Minnesota's system of 138,832 miles of roads and 13,121 bridges, carry 57 billion vehicle miles of travel annually. More than one-third of Minnesota's major roads are deficient, with 10 percent rated in poor condition and an additional 27 percent rated mediocre in 2011. An additional 19 percent of the state's major roads were rated in fair condition and 44 percent were rated in good condition.

In the Twin Cities metro area, half of major roads are deteriorated. Eighteen percent of Minneapolis-St. Paul roads are in poor condition, while 32 percent are in mediocre condition. Twenty percent are in fair condition and the remaining 31 percent are in good condition, the report said.

According to the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), the average driver in the Twin Cities area loses \$695 each year in the cost of lost time and wasted fuel as a result of traffic congestion. The average commuter spends 34 hours each year stuck in congestion.

TRIP does advocate for an "efficient and well-maintained transportation system" Moretti said, but it does not push for specific projects or referendums. What we point out is "that there is a cost to the public in terms of congestion, driving on rough roads and safety."

MnDOT will get \$18 billion over the next 20 years for road projects, but a recent report put out late last year by the Transportation Finance Advisory Committee said that the agency will need \$30 billion "to keep pace with Minnesota's growing population and aging infrastructure." That question is where is that money going to come from?

"Giving the green light to the many critically needed transportation projects in the Twin Cities area and around the state is going to require increased funding from all levels of government," said Will Wilkins, TRIP's executive director. "Unfortunately, unless Congress acts this year to adequately fund the Federal Highway Trust Fund, Minnesota is going to see its federal funding decrease dramatically starting this summer, making it that much more difficult to green light these needed improvements."