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Study: Roads cost Jackson and Miss. drivers big bucks

Anna Wolfe, The Clarion-Ledger



A new study shows Jackson streets are the most expensive in the state for drivers, based on additional operational costs like vehicle repairs. APAC Mississippi employee Rick Morton, right, drives a paver on a section of South Farish Street in downtown Jackson Tuesday (Photo: Justin Sellers/The Clarion-Ledger)

Velma Hayes would rather stay home than drive on Jackson streets. When she does drive, she goes out of her way to use the interstate and she never takes Bailey Avenue.

Late one night in 2014, Hayes nearly crashed her 2007 Chrysler Aspen on a large, unmarked pothole on Bailey, blowing out her tire and ruining the rim. Though the city paid to fix some of the damage caused by its poorly maintained road, Hayes was ultimately out roughly \$1,500 to make the needed repairs — replacing each tire and rim. "I don't drive it as much as I used to because the roads are so bad and the potholes are so bad," she said Thursday. "You're scared the same thing that happened before is going to happen."

Hayes is not alone. On average, Jackson's deteriorating streets cost drivers \$2,046 a year in additional vehicle operating costs, repairs, traffic-related delays and crashes, according to the latest report by Washington D.C.-based transportation research group TRIP.

Just days before the special legislative session, TRIP released its June 2017 report, showing the cost of Mississippi's poorly maintained roads, not just to drivers, but to the economic growth of the state.

"We realize these conversations are happening right now and our hope is to provide the information that's needed to move those conversations forward," said Carolyn Bonifas Kelly, TRIP's associate director of research and communication.

It doesn't appear legislators will take up talk of infrastructure overhauls in this last stretch, but they have not finalized the budget for Mississippi Department of Transportation.

Kelly announced the release of the report Thursday morning on the second floor of the state Capitol with help from Magee Mayor Jimmy Clyde and Jim Richards, KLLM Transport Services president and CEO.

"TRIP's report simply confirms what our industry feels from an aging infrastructure and highway system and the need to address that," said Richards, whose companies operate 4,000 trucks nationwide and deliver half-a-million shipments a year. "As we continue to experience deterioration in the highway system, we certainly see an increased cost in our maintenance expenses."

Every dollar of deferred maintenance — or that is not spent to fund roads now — turns into four to five dollars in needed future repairs, the TRIP report suggests. By contrast, every dollar spent on road, highway and bridge improvements translates to \$5.20 in reductions to vehicle maintenance costs, delays, fuel consumption, maintenance costs and emissions. The average Mississippi driver pays \$705 in additional operating costs, totaling \$2.9 million, compared to the \$553 national average, the report found.

"As roads get worse, those costs are only going to grow," said Scott Waller, interim president and CEO of the Mississippi Economic Council. Russ Latino, the Mississippi state director of Americans for Prosperity, however, thinks the report paints a misleading picture of the condition of Mississippi's roads and their impact on citizens.

"To suggest that Mississippians spend as much as \$2,000 a year on our vehicles because of road condition is not something many will find credible. To get there, it seems they've factored in a whole bunch of stuff that is suspect," Latino said.

TRIP releases a similar report periodically, the last time in 2016 alongside MEC, which was announcing the results of its own report conducted by the University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi State University and Cambridge Systematics as part of Blueprint Mississippi Taskforce.

The MEC study found the need for an additional \$375 million annual investment for roads and infrastructure across the state.

"Ultimately, we believe there has to be a long-term sustainable source of revenue to move this forward," Waller said.

Legislators have not formulated a long-term solution.

The Legislature passed a bill this year that would provide the capital city with funds to improve roads and infrastructure around state-owned property. The improvement district stretches west around Jackson State University and north

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beyond the University of Mississippi Medical Center into the Fondren business district.

Mississippi roads by the numbers:

- Road conditions in the state cost drivers a total of \$2.9 billion.
- Roads in these metro areas cost drivers on average: Gulfport-Biloxi-Pascagoula — \$1,267; Hattiesburg — \$1,293; Jackson — \$2,046; Southaven-DeSoto County — \$1,870.
- Nearly two-thirds of Mississippi's major urban roads are in poor or mediocre condition.
- 12 percent of Mississippi bridges are structurally deficient, the 12th highest rate in the nation.
- Mississippi has the third highest traffic fatality rate in the nation.

Source: TRIP June 2017 report
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