

Study: Congestion, poor roads cost Colorado drivers \$7.1 billion annually



Evening rush hour traffic builds on C470 near Yosemite.

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Congested and deteriorating roads are costing Colorado drivers \$7.1 billion a year in lost time and productivity, needed repairs and crash-related expenses, according to a study released on Thursday.

Backers of a proposed sales-tax hike to fund transportation needs latched immediately onto the study from TRIP, a Washington D.C.-based transportation research organization that advocates for safety and increased efficiency. [Mike Fitzgerald](#), president and CEO of the [Denver South Economic Development Partnership](#), said after a news conference that the research clearly shows that more work is needed than can be funded with the state's existing resources.

[Rocky Moretti](#), TRIP director of policy and research, said his organization, which is funded by a coalition of transportation advocates from across the country, said his organization decided to dig into Colorado's roadway issues both because it is a growing state and because it's a state that has grappled in recent years with how to pump more investment into its infrastructure. The Colorado Legislature [this year allocated \\$645 million](#) in new funding to roads and transit and approved asking voters in 2019 for permission to sell \$2.3 billion worth of bonds for transportation — but only if neither of two initiatives from outside groups passes on this November's statewide ballot.

Among the many numbers that TRIP compiled for the study, one that jumped out the most to Moretti was the fact that vehicle miles traveled in Colorado grew 11 percent between 2013 and 2016 — the sixth-greatest rate of growth in the country. That demonstrated both the state's economic vitality that is attracting a growing population and the urgency that is needed to fix roads before their upkeep falls too far behind the needs of its citizenry.

"We clearly see there's an ongoing need in Colorado that has yet to be addressed," Moretti said. "So, we're happy to educate residents about those challenges."

Colorado Department of Transportation officials have estimated the state has a \$9 billion backlog in transportation needs, and legislators and business leaders have worked for four years to address that. But even after this year's plan that received bipartisan support, many

business groups feel more needs to be done to create a long-term, sustainable funding source for roads and transit.

Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce leaders are collecting signatures to put on the ballot [a .62-cent sales-tax increase](#) that would generate enough money to repay \$6 billion in sold bonds. The revenue would be split, with 45 percent going to state highways like Interstate 25 and Interstate 70, 40 percent going to local governments for transportation needs and 15 percent going to a new fund for multi-modal projects like transit and bike lanes.

However, the free-market [Independence Institute](#) is collecting signatures for a competing ballot measure that would mandate the Legislature to set aside \$350 million per year to repay \$3.5 billion in bonds that would fund state highway projects. Institute president Jon Caldara has said the state has the resources to improve roads without raising taxes if it re-prioritizes spending, and many Republican leaders have backed his plan.

The TRIP study doesn't weigh in on potential funding sources, but it does offer compelling statistics to supplement any argument that more money is needed from somewhere for the state's roads. Among them:

- The \$7.1 billion annual cost is broken down into \$3.1 billion in congestion-related costs, \$2.1 billion in costs related to crashes and other safety issues and \$1.9 billion in vehicle-operating costs.
- The average motorist will lose \$2,306 per year to car repairs and to time lost in congestion.
- Those same motorists will spend 52 hours per year stuck in traffic jams.
- A full 40 percent of Denver-area roads are in poor condition.



Mike Fitzgerald, president and CEO of Denver South Economic Development Partnership, speaks Thursday at a news conference.

Fitzgerald said the congestion and lack of road maintenance has gotten serious enough that leaders of several corporations have told him they will not expand their workforces locally until government officials address the issues of traffic and affordable housing. He said that he hopes the seriousness of the situation comes across in some of the TRIP study's numbers.

"It is essential that we fix our crowded roads, that we expand the capacity of those roads" in addition to addressing transit issues, Fitzgerald said. "If we allow those to deteriorate, we aren't going to have as boisterous an economy here."