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Eastern Kentucky roads, bridges need repairs, but local governments lack funds to do so, TRIP report confirms

By : Mark White

Tag: [Kentucky Highway District 11](#), [national transportation research organization report](#), [TRIP report](#), [Whitley County](#)

A series of reports released Wednesday examines the condition of Eastern Kentucky's local roads and bridges, traffic safety and fatalities and the most pressing transportation needs. It largely concludes that county, local and state governments simply don't have anywhere near the funding they need to make all the necessary repairs.



Carolyn Kelly, Associate Director of Research & Communication for TRIP, held a press conference Wednesday afternoon in Whitley County to discuss the results of a TRIP report on state and regional transportation concerns.

The reports, by TRIP, a Washington, DC based national transportation research organization, are being released this week at transportation forums in each of the state's 12 Highway Districts.

"The area's transportation network is literally the engine of the state, but at this point that engine is in desperate need of a tune-up," Carolyn Bonifas Kelly, Associate Director of Research & Communication for TRIP and author of the report, said during a press

conference Wednesday afternoon at the Whitley County Courthouse.

"Right now the condition and the safety of eastern Kentucky's roads and bridges has a tremendous impact on the quality of life of the state's residents, on economic growth and on business development. Right now the lack of transportation funding means that the state's roads and bridges are increasingly deteriorating and they have a high rate of traffic fatalities."

Local conditions

Based on results of a TRIP survey completed by members of the Kentucky Magistrates and Commissioners Association (KMCA), TRIP has calculated the share of county-maintained roads in poor, fair or good condition in each of the state's 12 Highway Districts.

Whitley County is located in Highway District 11, which also includes: Knox, Laurel, Bell, Clay, Harlan, Jackson and Leslie counties.

In District 11, 26 percent of county-maintained roads are listed in poor condition, 34 percent in fair condition and 41 percent in good condition.

The report concludes that 38 percent of the roads need to be resurfaced in District 11, but in 2017 only 1 percent of those roads were resurfaced.

In addition, the report concludes that 8 percent of the roads in District 11 need to be fully reconstructed, but none were in reconstructed in 2017.

"There is a significant amount of work that needs to be done, but the small pool of money available makes it very difficult to address deficiencies on the state's roads," Kelly said.

"Without additional transportation funding at the local, state and federal levels those challenges will remain unaddressed. Without additional funding, the condition and the

safety of the local roads will continue to deteriorate impacting quality of life and economic growth of the state."

Whitley County Judge-Executive Pat White Jr. noted that most people probably don't realize there are almost 1,200 bridges in our highway district, and 2.8 million highway miles being traveled in one year in the district.

Bridge conditions

TRIP's reports examine bridge conditions in each of the state's highway districts, including the share of bridges in each highway district that are structurally deficient.

Bridges that are structurally deficient have significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components.

The reports for each highway district include lists of the 25 most heavily traveled structurally deficient bridges and the 25 most structurally deficient bridges with the lowest average rating for the condition of the deck, substructure and superstructure.

In District 11, there are 249 structurally deficient bridges out of 1,183 total bridges or about 21 percent, which is the highest rate among all the districts in the state, Kelly noted.

"What it means when a bridge is structurally deficient is that there is significant deterioration to the major components of the bridge, like the deck, superstructure and substructure," Kelly said.

"It is important to note – especially when talking about structurally deficient bridges – that these bridges are safe for travel and they are maintained and monitored on a regular basis by the organizations responsible for their upkeep but many of them do need significant repairs or replacement at some point."



Whitley County Judge-Executive Pat White Jr. noted during a press conference Wednesday that while 38 percent of the county roads in our district need resurfacing, there is only enough state funding to repair 1-2 percent of those roads annually.

Lowest average rated bridges

The two lowest structurally deficient bridges with the lowest average rating for deck, substructure and superstructure listed in the report for District 11 are both in Whitley County, and are both currently closed.

The Old Mountain Ash Pike Bridge (ranked 1) over the Clear Fork River was built in 1917, and had average daily traffic of 300 vehicles.

The Watts Creek Road Bridge over Watts Creek (ranked 2) was built in 1935 and had average daily traffic of 250 vehicles.

Two other Whitley County bridges on that list are open, but are restricted to only lower-weight vehicles.

The KY-92 bridge (ranked 14) over Pleasant Run was built in 1932 and has average daily traffic of 1,767 vehicles.

The Bethel Road Bridge (ranked 25) over Patterson Creek was built in 1945 and has average daily traffic of 100 vehicles.

Two other Whitley County bridges made the bottom 25 report, and are still open without restrictions.

The KY-204 bridge (ranked 15) over Young's Creek was built in 1970 and has average daily traffic of 1,356 vehicles.

The Old Jellico Creek Bridge (ranked 21) over Paint Creek was built in 1950 and has average daily traffic of 150 vehicles.

Most heavily traveled deficient bridges

Three I-75 bridges in Laurel County were ranked numbers one through three on the list of most heavily traveled structurally deficient bridges in the Highway 11 District.

The northbound I-75 bridge over the Laurel River (ranked 1), which is 1.5 miles north of US25E, was built in 1969 and has average daily traffic of 26,413 vehicles. It currently has a weight restriction.

The southbound and northbound bridges over KY-2041 (ranked 2 and 3) were both built in 1969 and have average daily traffic of 22,840 vehicles.

Two other Whitley County bridges made the list, including: the KY-92 bridge over Pleasant Run (ranked 24).

The KY-92 bridge over Jellico Creek (ranked 15) was built in 1932 and has average daily traffic of 2,824 vehicles. It currently is restricted to only lower-weight vehicles.

White said that he doesn't have any kind of estimate on what it would take just to repair all the roads and bridges in Whitley County, much less the entire highway district.

Bridge repair estimates range from \$100,000 to millions of dollars for each bridge in Whitley County depending on a number of factors, such as length and current condition.

"As local officials what we try to do is manage the money that we have to try and address the biggest concerns and most hazardous concerns," White said.

He noted that the county only gets enough money from the state to resurface 1-2 percent of the roads annually.

It costs about \$70,000 to pave one single mile of county road, which is a 14-foot wide road.

White added that when gas taxes dropped a few years ago due to lower prices and more fuel-efficient vehicles, Whitley County lost about \$380,000 annually in gas tax revenue or roughly 25 percent of its share of that funding.

"One of the things really putting pressure on counties is having to do more with less," White said.

Report not tied to gas tax proposal

There is currently a bipartisan proposal in the Kentucky General Assembly that would raise the gas tax by 10 cents per gallon, and impose annual fees on hybrid and electric vehicles in order to increase the state's stagnant road fund.

House Bill 609 would add an extra \$391 million a year to the state's road fund.

Kelly said the timing of TRIP report is not connected with the proposed legislation, and that TRIP doesn't take a position on how states fund their transportation system.

"Our goal is to just make sure as those discussions are happening that all the information is available to the residents and the elected officials," Kelly noted.

Kelly added that the deficiencies found in the report are not a reflection of the job local

municipalities, county government or state departments of transportation are doing.

"In fact they are doing a tremendous job with the funds they have available, but the reality is that they face a significant and growing transportation shortfall," Kelly noted.

Fatal crash rate

The TRIP report also examined serious and fatal traffic crashes.

Between 2014-16, 156 people died on highways in District 11, or an average of 52 fatalities per year, and there were 575 serious injuries on District 11 roads during that time frame.

"We have also calculated the fatality rate here in this district and found that it is much higher than the statewide average and significantly higher than national average," Kelly said.

Between 2014-2016, there were 1.84 highway fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel in District 11 compared to a 1.54 state average and the national average of 1.08.