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DOT: State's less busy highways now smoother

FRONT PAGE

Advocacy group issues report, sharply dissenting

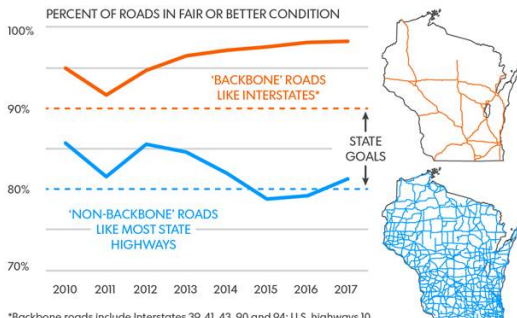
Keegan Kyle, Appleton Post-Crescent

MADISON - In a shift from previous years, the pavement conditions of major Wisconsin highways as well as less traveled state highways improved last year, according to newly released state figures.

A road-construction advocacy group immediately disputed those findings, however, issuing its own report Tuesday saying half the state highways are at best mediocre.

The Department of Transportation, part of Gov. Scott Walker's administration, said about 98.3 percent of high-traffic roads called "backbone" highways were rated fair or better last year, up slightly from 98.1 percent in 2016. Meanwhile, 81.3 percent of other roads called "non-backbone" highways earned the rating, up from 79.2 percent.

MAJOR ROADS AND OTHERS MEET GOALS



*Backbone roads include Interstates 39, 41, 43, 90 and 94; U.S. highways 10, 41, 51, 53 and 151; and state highway 29.
Graphic by Keegan Kyle/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin
Source: Wisconsin Department of Transportation

Backbone highways include Interstates 39, 41, 43, 90 and 94, and a few other busy roads such as highways 10, 29 and 51. They collectively represent about 13 percent of Wisconsin's 12,000-mile highway network and carry about half of its estimated traffic.

Annual road quality figures have previously shown major highways improving and less traveled roads falling into greater disrepair. In 2015 and

2016, the ratio of non-major highways that were rated fair or better fell below the state's goal of 80 percent.

The latest estimates put the state above its goal for those roads but still lower than annual estimates from 2010 to 2014.

Department of Transportation officials released the new figures to USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin two months before Walker seeks to fend off a re-election challenge from state Superintendent Tony Evers. But the DOT released similar annual estimates at the same time last year, outside of election season.

Walker and Evers have been trading barbs in recent weeks over state funding for road repairs, but neither has publicly outlined his plans. Last year, Republicans who were divided over how to pay for repairs delayed the state budget from being approved for nearly three months.

The new figures are part of an annual performance report for legislators and the public about the state Department of Transportation's success in achieving road-quality goals. The report does not show conditions for individual highways.

State transportation officials didn't immediately respond to requests for comment. Last year, they underscored prioritizing repairs to high-traffic roads "in recognition of its importance to the state's economy with respect to businesses and the traveling public."

The state aims for at least 90 percent of backbone highways to be rated fair or better.

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