

Transport Topics

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Alabama's Deteriorating Roads Cost Drivers \$5.3 billion a Year, Report Says



Highway interchange near Birmingham, Ala. (Jay Reeves/Associated Press)

Alabama's roads and bridges have deteriorated to such an extent that it costs each resident \$5.3 billion a year, according to a report by a nonprofit transportation research organization.

Those costs, added up by Washington, D.C.-based Trip, include higher vehicle operating costs, traffic crashes and congestion-related delays, such as gasoline consumption for autos idling in traffic.

Trip released studies for several Alabama metro areas, including Montgomery, Florence, Decatur-Huntsville, Mobile, Montgomery, Tuscaloosa and Anniston-Gadsden. The reports coincide with Gov. Kay Ivey's expected announcement Feb. 27 of a plan to increase funding for roads, bridges and other infrastructure. Deficiencies in county roads and bridges have been one of the main problems cited by supporters of an increase in the state gasoline tax, which hasn't changed since 1992.

In the Birmingham area, Trip states that about two-fifths of major locally and state-maintained roads are in poor or mediocre condition, and 4% of locally or state-maintained bridges are structurally deficient. In Alabama, 49% of the state's bridges were built in 1969 or earlier.

And because of bad roads, traffic congestion in Birmingham is increasing, with drivers spending about 37 hours a year in delays. What's more, Alabama's traffic fatality rate is higher than other states in metro areas, and significantly higher on rural roads.

State Sen. Jabo Waggoner (R-Vestavia Hills) said this study is not the only alarm bell. The American Society of Civil Engineering gave Alabama's roads a D-plus, while its bridges got a C-minus, he said.

"We have hundreds of bridges in this state that do not meet code," he said. "Automobiles are traveling over these bridges every day. School buses travel over failing bridges."

Waggoner, speaking at a news conference Feb. 25 at the Birmingham Business Alliance, said he supports a gas tax increase of 10 cents, phased in over a two- to three-year period. The total gas tax in Alabama, including federal and state tax and a volume-weighted average of city and county taxes, equates to 39.5 cents a gallon, according to the American Petroleum Institute. That is lower than in all but 10 states and below the national average of 52.2 cents.



Mark Humphrey/Associated Press

The majority of the tax increase, he argued, would be paid by the trucking industry and out-of-state drivers, with Alabama residents picking up about 34% of the tab, based on use.

Rocky Moretti, Director of Research & Policy with Trip, said road maintenance costs only multiply over time, if not addressed quickly. Yet the state's current transportation only leaves about \$150 million each year for new projects.

Birmingham Business Alliance CEO Brian Hilson said better roads are an economic development issue. Each year about \$432 billion in goods are shipped to and from Alabama, largely on the state's roads, while about 940,000 full-time jobs statewide depend on the state's transportation system.

"A quality transportation system is one of the most essential components to growing our economy and enhancing our quality of life," Hilson said.