

Poor road conditions cost drivers, report says



Traffic moves to one lane because of a wreck involving an overturned trailer north of Exit 77 on interstate 20/59 in Tuscaloosa on April 20, 2018. (Staff File Photo/The Tuscaloosa News)

By Ed Enoch / Staff Writer

A Washington, D.C.-based transportation research group released a report Monday estimating congestion and the condition of area roadways cost Tuscaloosa drivers about \$1,713 annually in lost time and additional expenses.

"Without additional transportation funding, Alabama's road and bridges will continue to deteriorate, the already high traffic fatality rate may rise and drivers and businesses may lose out on even more time and money because they are stuck in traffic congestion," said Carolyn Kelly, the associate director of research for TRIP and author of the Tuscaloosa report. Statewide, TRIP estimates the additional costs associated with congestion and road conditions for drivers to be \$5.3 billion annually. The report follows a similar study published by the University of Alabama's Alabama Transportation Institute, which estimated the state needs to invest \$600 million to \$800 million to address its new roadway capacity needs between now and 2040.

"While those costs are already startlingly high, they are projected to grow higher in the future unless the state can provide additional transportation funding," Kelly said. "At current funding levels, the state is only spending a fraction of what is recommended to build an infrastructure system that will allow Alabama to remain economically competitive."

The Tuscaloosa report by TRIP was one of a series of reports on the state's major metropolitan areas released on Monday by the private nonprofit. TRIP and local officials held a series of news conferences statewide to discuss the reports. A comprehensive statewide report will be released on Tuesday. The report says 55 percent of local major roads and highways are in poor or mediocre shape. In Tuscaloosa, 35 percent of major urban roads are in poor condition and 20 percent are in mediocre condition with potholes, rutting and rough surfaces. The report states 16 percent of area roads are in fair condition and 29 percent are in good condition. The report finds 4 percent of the area's 479 bridges are structurally deficient, meaning there is significant deterioration of parts of the span. Most bridges are designed with 50-year service lives before they need overhauls or replacements, and 49 percent of the spans in Alabama are older than 50 years. From 2015-17, an average of 43 people were killed in traffic accidents each year in Tuscaloosa, with the report noting that roadway conditions typically account for about a third of fatal accidents.

In a breakdown of the annual financial impact for Tuscaloosa drivers, the report estimates congestion costs an additional \$448, crashes where roadway feature were likely a contributing factor accounted for \$492, and drivers pay \$773 for additional vehicle operating and repair costs. The TRIP report finds similar annual delay times for drivers stuck in congestion to the earlier report by the Alabama Traffic Institution. Drivers spend about 18 hours annually stuck in traffic. The UA report estimated the time at 16 hours. The reports come as state lawmakers prepare for a legislative session that is expected to be dominated by debate on the state's infrastructure needs and a possible gas tax increase. Local leaders cited the reports' as they lobbied in favor of the proposed rate increase. Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox and Jim Page, president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, commended Gov. Kay Ivey and legislative leaders for consideration of an increase in the gas tax, which has not seen a rate increase since 1992.

"If Alabama is ever going to escape the shadows of being 47th, 48th, 49th and 50th in everything that matters, infrastructure is going to play a large role," Maddox said.

The idea of increasing the gas tax was considered during recent legislative sessions, but lawmakers didn't advance the proposal.

"After the 2017 session, we decided we needed more education (for public)," said Page, who is also chairman for the advocacy coalition Alliance for Alabama's Infrastructure. Page is optimistic this year with talk at a federal level of possible bipartisan compromises on infrastructure legislation and, in Montgomery, support for an increase of the gas tax by the governor and legislative leaders.

"I think we are a lot further along than we are two years ago," Page said. Page and Maddox said the state has an opportunity to make transformative investment in infrastructure.

"We stand at a real moment of opportunity to address these problems that we have never been able to do in my life time. This is exciting," Maddox said.

The UA report outlined seven options for the state depending on how much state and local leaders wish to spend and what level of performance they wish from the state's roadway infrastructure.

The UA report states the investment in new road capacity has not kept pace with demands in the road network created by population growth and increases in the number of registered vehicles and miles traveled. The researchers also say a combination of better fuel efficiency, inflation and unchanged state and federal fuel tax rates have decreased the effectiveness of one of the chief sources of revenue.

"There is a stark contrast between the increase in demand on one side and our struggle to keep up with capacity to match that," said Shashi Nambisan, executive director of the Alabama Transportation Institute. "If we don't take care of it now, it is only going to get worse the longer we delay it."

The TRIP report calculates for every \$1 of deferred road maintenance it will cost \$4 to \$5 in needed future repairs.

The report argued the state's transportation infrastructure remains a critical component for the state's economic development efforts.

Page argued the gas tax increase should be considered as an investment rather than simply a tax increase. "Another reason this is important for Alabama is over the last five years, 30 state across the country have invested in infrastructure. The lion's share of those state, probably all of them, have adjusted their gas tax they pay in their state," Page said. "More importantly, seven of our sister Southeastern states have invested, so that placed us as at a competitive disadvantage when we are trying to recruit economic development projects, when we are trying to recruit talent to our state." Nambisan and Kelly said the matching funds required by state and local government to secure federal grant funding for transportation project will likely increase in the coming years, potentially inverting the current model where grants cover the majority of the project cost. Page argued the state needs to position itself to be able to compete for potential future federal funding. "We are not in a position today to leverage those federal dollars like our sister Southeastern states are who have addressed this. So that is a once in a generation type of opportunity that we would be leaving money on the table," Page said. Reach Ed Enoch at ed.enoich@tuscaloosaneWS.com or 205-722-0209.