Poor road conditions cost drivers, report says

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 Tuscaloosa 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 $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.