

## National group says Missouri rural roads, bridges in poor shape

By Bob Watson

Missouri has the nation's 13th worst rural roads, a national study announced Wednesday.

TRIP, formerly known as The Road Information Program, included the Missouri data in a new, 43-page report titled "Rural Connections: Challenges and Opportunities in America's Heartland."

In a news release announcing the report, TRIP said: "The report finds that 21 percent of Missouri's rural roads are rated in poor condition — the 13th highest rate in the nation — and 27 percent are rated in mediocre condition.

"Nine percent of Missouri's rural bridges are rated as poor/structurally deficient, the 16th highest share in the U.S."

Missouri Transportation Director Patrick McKenna told the News Tribune: "We have more than \$8 billion in high-priority unfunded transportation needs in Missouri. The TRIP report reflects that and also demonstrates how Gov. Parson's priorities of infrastructure and workforce are right on target."

Lawmakers this year budgeted \$50 million in general revenue funds to repair or replace 35 rural bridges, and they approved a \$301 million bond issue to pay for repairing or replacing another 215 mostly rural bridges around the state.

However, that bond issue can't happen unless the state also receives a federal grant to help build a new Interstate 70 bridge across the Missouri River at Rocheport.

McKenna said: "Given the state's limited transportation funding, we must focus our attention on keeping the system condition from declining and, with current funding, that is a tremendous challenge.

"Some additional funds are included in the Fiscal Year 2020 state budget for bridge improvements, which will be a help, but we still have a long way to go to fix all of the bridges in need of repair and to address our backlog of unfunded needs."

Missouri's 33,859 miles of state-owned highways is the nation's seventh largest system — including 1,380 miles of interstate highways, which is the nation's fifth largest.

The state's 10,385 bridges is the sixth largest in the country.

The state pays for building and maintaining its road and bridge system with money raised through a 17-cents-per-gallon tax on motor fuels sold in the state — a tax that hasn't increased since 1996.

However, voters last November rejected a proposed 10-cent increase in that tax, phased-in over five years.

McKenna told the News Tribune: "We will continue to do our best to keep our roads and bridges in the best condition we can with the resources available to us."

The TRIP news release said its 43-page report "evaluates the safety and condition of the nation's rural roads and bridges, and finds that the nation's rural transportation system is in need of immediate improvements to address deficient roads and bridges, high crash rates, and inadequate connectivity and capacity."

The report also looked at the fatality rate for each 100 million miles that vehicles traveled (VMT) on rural, non-interstate roads.

In that category, the report said, Missouri's rural death rate — 1.66 per 100 million VMT — "is significantly higher than the fatality rate on all other roads in the state," at 1.01 per 100 million VMT.

However, Missouri's fatality rate on rural, non-interstate roads is not high enough to place the state among the 20 states with the highest rates.

And Missouri's rate, at 1.66, is lower than the national average of 2.14 deaths per 100 million VMT.

In its executive summary, the TRIP report said: "America's rural heartland plays a vital role as home to a significant share of the nation's population, many of its natural resources and popular tourist destinations.

"It is also the primary source of the energy, food and fiber that supports America's economy and way of life. The strength of the nation's rural economy is heavily reliant on the quality of its transportation system, particularly the roads and highways that link rural America with the rest of the U.S. and to markets in other countries."

However, while "good transportation is essential in rural areas to provide access to jobs, to facilitate the movement of goods and people, to access opportunities for health care and educational skills, and to provide links to other social services," the report said, "roads, highways, rails and bridges in the nation's heartland face a number of significant challenges: They lack adequate capacity; they fail to provide needed levels of connectivity to many communities; and they cannot adequately support growing freight travel in many corridors."

And Michael Right, the AAA-Auto Club of Missouri's vice president of public affairs, said in the TRIP news release: "One in 5 miles of rural roads in Missouri is rated in poor condition and one in 10 rural bridges are structurally deficient.

"The lack of additional resources to fund needed repairs and replacements leads to the continuing decline of our basic transportation network. As additional resources go wanting, lives are being lost, commerce is being impacted and the quality of life lessened.

"No time is too soon to turn this around and get the resources needed."