Pennsylvania rural roads, bridges get poor marks

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Rural roads and bridges in Pennsylvania don't get the care they need, and motorists are nearly three times as likely to die on rural roads in the state, according to a study released last week by the national transportation research group TRIP.

The report comes two weeks after the state canceled a $200 million program to upgrade 900 miles of rural roads for the second year in a row because of continuing costs from landslides, but the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation says it is caring for rural roads through another program.

The study, called "Rural Connections: Challenges and Opportunities in America's Heartland," said road conditions can be more important to rural residents and businesses because there aren't as many transportation options as in urban areas. Almost all farms and many manufacturing facilities are in rural areas and need roads and bridges to get their products to market.

In addition, road access is important to travel and tourism, the study said, because a vast majority of tourist attractions, including state and national parks, are in areas with a population of below 2,500, the federal definition of a rural area.

“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,” the study said.

“Rural roads and bridges have significant deficiencies and deterioration, they lack many desirable safety features, and they experience fatal traffic crashes at a rate far higher than all other roads and highways.”

The 43-page study reviewed data for all states and concluded that Pennsylvania ranks 12th in the number of rural roads in poor condition at 21%; fourth in rural bridges in poor condition at 18%; and 20th in deaths per million vehicle miles traveled at 2.18. On all other Pennsylvania roads, the death rate per million vehicle miles traveled was 0.79.

Across the country, too many rural roads have poor pavement conditions, narrow lanes and inadequate lighting, all of which contribute to higher-than-expected accident rates, the study said. Nationally, the rate of deaths per million miles traveled is 2.14 in rural areas and 0.88 on all roads.

In a statement about the study, PennDOT spokeswoman Alexis Campbell said Gov. Tom Wolf's Restore Pennsylvania program "includes a focus on rural roadways and flood control infrastructure among its many benefits." The program will invest $4.5 billion over four years on road and bridge work as well as other projects such as expanding broadband service in rural areas, reducing blight in urban and rural areas, and improving the availability of natural gas to communities.

“There’s no question that Pennsylvania is in desperate need of infrastructure funding," Ms. Campbell said. “While PennDOT has made the most of the resources it has available, a significant investment on the part of the federal government is becoming more and more unlikely," referring to President Donald Trump’s refusal Wednesday to discuss funding a proposed $2 trillion national infrastructure bill as long as Democrats continue to investigate his conduct.

Ms. Campbell said that since 2015 there are 364 fewer miles of roads with a poor ride quality and nearly 1,200 fewer poor-quality bridges since 2014.

Doug Hill, executive director of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, praised PennDOT for taking a creative approach to addressing rural issues. On bridges, for example, the department started a program that bundles several county-owned bridges in one area under a single contract, saving money and time on completion and eliminating a local financial contribution.

The state also has fixed more than 550 small bridges, many of them in rural areas, over the past four years through a public-private partnership with contractor Plenary Walsh Keystone Partners.

“I’d put them well ahead of other states in terms of their imagination and creativity," Mr. Hill said. “They’re as efficient as they can be with the money available.”

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