

# The Post and Courier

FOUNDED 1803 •



WINNER OF THE 2015 PULITZER PRIZE FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

Thursday, May 23, 2019

POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Charleston, S.C. \$1.50

## Editorial: How South Carolina can improve rural road safety



Morning traffic on S.C. Highway 41 in Mount Pleasant, heading toward U.S. Highway 17. Tuesday, Dec. 18, 2018. Wade Spees/Staff

According to a recent report from TRIP, a national nonprofit advocating on transportation issues, South Carolina has the deadliest rural roads in the nation. Obviously this is cause for concern.

But the notion that South Carolina's roads are deadly due to a lack of spending on maintenance and improvements, something the report's authors strongly imply, is a dubious one.

The same report found that South Carolina didn't even crack the top 20 states for the percentage of roads or bridges ranked as being in "poor" condition. About 40 percent of the state's roads were "mediocre" or worse.

That's not exactly a statistic worth celebrating, but it's at least an opportunity to see the road maintenance glass as slightly more than half full.

And unlike some other state governments, South Carolina has made it a clear priority to better fund the preservation and revitalization of its massive road network — the fourth-largest in the nation — by passing a gas tax increase in 2017.

TRIP gets most of its funding from groups that have an interest in spending more on roads, so it's unsurprising that they would cite potholes and deteriorating pavement as top threats to motorists — which in some states is reasonably accurate.

But a deeper dive into South Carolina's fatal crash data doesn't bear that out.

The most obvious problem is that our state perennially ranks among the worst for drunk driving deaths. Fully 32% of all road fatalities in South Carolina in 2017 involved an impaired driver, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Nearly half of fatal crashes involved speeding. And about 17% of people killed on the state's roads that year weren't driving a motor vehicle.

In other words, the most straightforward way to improve safety on South Carolina roads is to better enforce existing traffic laws. Beefing up bicycle and pedestrian amenities would help too, particularly in urban areas where doing so would have benefits that extend beyond safety.

All of this is of particular note as federal lawmakers and President Donald Trump consider what could end up being a multitrillion-dollar infrastructure spending package that so far lacks even the most minimal framework for setting tangible goals.

Spending taxpayer dollars on infrastructure can produce tremendous benefits — economic gains, safety improvements, higher quality of life — but only when focused on projects that make sense as long-term investments.

By contrast, the fact that 40% of South Carolina's rural roads are in mediocre shape or worse offers a warning against overbuilding a system that will prove difficult and costly to maintain.

South Carolina lawmakers did the right thing by raising the state gas tax as a way to fund an extensive road maintenance backlog. The resulting improvements will almost certainly save lives.

But we should be wary of the suggestion that road spending is in and of itself any way to measure the safety or effectiveness of a transportation system.