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EDITORIAL

Rural roads priority for improvement

The Times and Democrat

Traveling in South Carolina this Memorial Day weekend is dangerous.

Motorists should know by now that the state's roads rank among the deadliest in the nation year-round. And the holiday weekend that launches the "100 deadliest days" for highway travel is no exception.

The team at asecurelife.com analyzed data on Memorial Day weekend fatal highway crashes from 2013-17 and found South Carolina is the sixth-deadliest state with 1.02 fatal crashes per 100,000 population. As a comparison, West Virginia was worst at 1.3 fatal crashes per 100,000. Maine was best at .3.

Many believe busy roads in population centers and interstate highways account for the high death toll in our state, but Orangeburg County continues to be proof that a locale with a maze of rural roads can be deadly. The county annually has among the highest per-capita number of fatal crashes in the state. Already in 2019 (as of May 19), there have been 15 fatalities here. That's up from 14 a year ago at this time.

Statistics from TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit, show just how dangerous the state's rural roads are. TRIP's new report, Rural Connections: Challenges and Opportunities in America's Heartland, concludes the rate of traffic fatalities on South Carolina's non-interstate, rural roads is the highest in the nation and is nearly four times higher than the fatality rate on all other roads in the state – 3.6 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel vs. 0.98.

The continuing deadly toll is a key reason the S.C. Department of Transportation in 2017 made improvements on rural roads a priority in its campaign to fix highways and bridges in the state. The Rural Roads Safety program is an ongoing effort to make changes such as widening shoulders, adding rumble strips and brighter pavement markings, and installing guardrails and cable barriers.

The effort has not gone unnoticed.

"With passage of road funding legislation in 2017, we are pleased that South Carolina now has additional resources to make safety a priority, specifically on rural roads," said Jennifer Patterson, executive director of South Carolina Alliance to Fix Our Roads. "Since 2017, over 900 miles of rural roads have been approved for safety-specific improvements. We recognize that safety is a balance between the condition of the roads and driver behavior; however, we hope that as these projects continue to be rolled out, they will aid in helping the state shed this disparaging ranking."

Even with improvements, the TRIP report finds that 40 percent of South Carolina's rural roads are rated in poor or mediocre condition. Nine percent of South Carolina's rural bridges are rated as poor/structurally deficient. Bridges that are poor/structurally deficient have significant deterioration to the major components of the bridge and are often posted for lower weight or closed to traffic, restricting or redirecting large vehicles, including agricultural equipment, commercial trucks, school buses and emergency services vehicles.

Improving infrastructure is a national priority. Republicans and Democrats agree on that and pay lip service to doing so. Yet political rancor continues to delay infrastructure legislation and necessary funding that could provide valuable assistance to states such as South Carolina in hastening improvements that could save lives now and long into the future.

We echo the words of Ed Mortimer, vice president of transportation infrastructure for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce: "This report highlights again the critical need for federal action to modernize our nation's infrastructure. We have a historic opportunity to address many rural infrastructure needs with President Trump and Congress discussing a major infrastructure bill. Let's hope they act to address this critical issue."