Bridge, Road Deterioration Problematic In California

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As the U.S. Interstate Highway System reaches 64 years old, it faces increasing congestion, unprecedented levels of travel – particularly by large trucks – and insufficient funding to make needed repairs and improvements. America’s most critical transportation link will need to be rebuilt and expanded to meet the nation’s growing transportation needs, according to a report released Tuesday by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit. The report, Restoring the Interstate Highway System: Meeting America’s Transportation Needs with a Reliable, Safe & Well-Maintained National Highway Network, looks at the Interstate system’s use, condition, and benefits, and the findings of a 2019 report prepared by the Transportation Research Board (TRB), at the request of Congress as part of the Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, on the condition and use of the Interstate system and on actions required to restore and upgrade the Interstate system.

Figures included in the report show California as the number one ranked state in the category of Congested Urban Interstates and ninth in the Pavement in Poor Condition category. The state also was ranked number 10 nationwide in state also was ranked number 10 nationwide in U.S. Vehicle travel on California’s Interstates increased 17 percent from 2000 to 2018. Eight percent of Interstate travel in California is by combination trucks.

“Carrying more than half of truck travel, the Interstate Highway System is critical to the nation’s supply chain. With $75 billion in cost added to freight transportation each year and 67 million tons of carbon dioxide from trucks released into the air due to highway congestion, the United States cannot afford to wait any longer to make the investments necessary to address systemic and growing problems stemming from decades of neglect,” said Chris Spear, president and CEO of the American Trucking Associations. “It is past time for elected officials to provide sufficient and sustainable funding for Interstate highway improvements.”

TRIP’s report finds that while pavement smoothness on most segments of the U.S. Interstate system is acceptable, the crumbling foundations of most highway segments need to be reconstructed, and that continued resurfacing rather than addressing underlying foundational issues provides diminishing returns and results in shorter periods of pavement smoothness.

As the aging system’s foundations continue to deteriorate, most Interstate highways, bridges and interchanges will need to be rebuilt or replaced. According to the TRIP report, pavements on six percent of California’s Interstate highways are in poor condition, the ninth highest share in the nation. Four percent of California’s Interstate bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition, the tenth highest share in the U.S.

“A safe and well-maintained Interstate Highway System can strengthen America’s economy, enhance personal mobility and facilitate more dependable, modernized national transportation network. Equipment manufacturers are working hard to keep these vital industries properly supplied in the midst of COVID-19 and we need lawmakers to do their part to support these essential supply chains now and for the long haul.”

The ability of states to invest in Interstate highway repairs and improvements will be hampered by the tremendous decrease in vehicle travel that has occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is estimated to reduce state transportation revenues by at least 30 percent – approximately $50 billion – over the next 18 months.

Based on the findings of the TRB Interstate report, TRIP has provided a set of recommendations for the restoration of the Interstate Highway System, which includes: the foundational reconstruction of Interstate highways, bridges and interchanges; improvement to roadway safety features; system right-sizing, including upgrading of some roadway corridors to Interstate standards; adding needed additional highway capacity on existing routes; adding additional connectors; and, modifying some urban segments to maintain connectivity while remediating economic and social disruption.

“The long-term vision that helped establish the current Interstate system nearly 65 years ago is needed again today,” said Dave Kearby, TRIP’s executive director. “In order to rebuild the nation’s economy, maintain personal and commercial mobility, and improve quality of life, adequate transportation investment and a sustainable, long-term funding source for the federal surface transportation program must remain a priority.”