

There's not enough money to fix all of the state's deteriorating roads and bridges, PennDOT says

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The PennDOT Interstate 83 project at the Union Deposit Road interchange. This work is part of a widening and rebuilding project focused on a 2.77-mile section of Interstate 83, encompassing Exit 48 - Union Deposit Road through Exit 50 - U.S. 22 (Colonial Park/Progress) and Exit 51 for Interstate 81. June 26, 2020. Dan Gleiter | dgleiter@pennlive.com

By **Jana Benscoter** | jbenscoter@pennlive.com

Prior to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, Pennsylvania's infrastructure already had been suffering from aging deterioration and inadequate funding.

The commonwealth has one of the oldest interstate systems in the nation and one of the longest in terms of miles compared to other states. Despite also having the highest gas tax in America, Pennsylvania remains on transportation analysts' radars for having some of the worst pavement conditions and structurally sound bridges.

"Pennsylvania has one of the largest state-maintained interstate systems in the nation, with more than 1,300 linear miles managed by PennDOT," PennDOT press secretary Alexis Campbell said. "This translates to 2,740 miles when recognizing that each direction of the highway must be managed independently. While this reflects 6 percent of Pennsylvania's total highway mileage, it accounts for 26 percent of all traffic."

[Pennsylvania relies heavily on the gasoline tax](#) to finance work on roads and bridges. With people driving less and buying less gas during the COVID-19 pandemic, the state is seeing less revenue from the gas tax. The Wolf administration is projecting gas tax revenue could decline as much as \$800 million over the next 18 months. That's a worst-case scenario, according to officials at the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

Because of that decline, however, [PennDOT is planning on spending at least \\$300 million less](#) in construction projects than the agency initially planned.

"While historic and much needed, [Act 89 \[in 2013\]](#) did not meet the need that was identified by the Transportation Funding Advisory Commission in 2011," Campbell continued. "The report noted that unmet needs would grow to \$7.2 billion by 2020, but Act 89 was designed to build to roughly \$2.4 billion by its fifth year.

"Additionally, Act 89 envisioned more funding from the federal government to assist with interstates, and as such, we focused on the rest of our system in developing our needs assessment. This federal

investment has not happened, and our needs far outpace available state funding," she said.

The National Highway System is short \$1.9 billion, which includes \$700 million for interstates, she explained. PennDOT, to meet funding needs of Pennsylvania interstates, has created a gradual increase in interstate funding that shifted money away from traffic routes and rural roads to interstate funding, she said.

"With reduced revenues overall and investments moving toward interstates, resources for other roadways - especially rural ones - will decrease," Campbell said. "This situation underscores the fact that we can no longer rely on the gas tax to meet our highway and bridge needs. As vehicles become more efficient and even stop using motor fuels, we need to move to a truly sustainable revenue source. On top of these market realities, the federal government hasn't taken meaningful action on transportation funding in years, and we don't know how this pandemic will affect their willingness to step up to the plate."

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials in April sent a letter to Congressional Leadership requesting that the "Phase 4" emergency relief and economic relief and recovery package include an immediate \$49.95 billion for flexible federal funding to offset any state transportation revenue impacts over the next 18 months, Campbell said.

Pennsylvania supported this proposal.

"This critical investment has not come to pass, and the CARES Act only includes \$15 billion to be divided among all state DOTs, which isn't nearly enough," she said. "While there are clearly many unmet needs, PennDOT has made the most of the funds it has available. More than 5,236 miles of roadway were improved by department forces in 2019 and the number of state-owned bridges in poor condition has decreased from a high of 6,034 in 2008 to roughly 2,600. Across the state, 1,547 projects are underway or expected to start or go out for bid this year. From January 2020 Through June 2020, 117 construction contracts for highway, bridge, and other improvement projects were completed statewide through PennDOT's private-sector partners. Over 30,000 miles of roadway have been improved since January 2015. There are 516 fewer miles with poor ride quality than in 2015 and nearly 1,400 fewer poor-condition bridges in 2014."

The TRIP report, a private nonprofit that researches and distributes economic and technical data on surface transportation issues, recently published its key findings. The 2019 report — "Restoring The Interstate Highway System: Meeting America's Transportation Needs with a Reliable, Safe & Well-Maintained National Highway Network" — is based on 2018 figures. It found that:

- The Interstate Highway System has a persistent and growing backlog of physical and operational deficiencies as a result of age, heavy use, and deferred reinvestment, and is in need of major reconstruction and modernization.
- Most roadway segments of the Interstate Highway System retain their original underlying foundations and need to be completely rebuilt from the subbase up.

- The repeated resurfacing of Interstate highways is not addressing the deterioration of roadway subbases. Repeated resurfacing — rather than addressing underlying foundational issues — provides diminishing returns as additional resurfacing results in increasingly shorter periods of pavement smoothness and is likely to result in higher lifecycle costs than periodic reconstruction.
- The modernization of the Interstate Highway System needs to include the following: reconstruction of the majority of Interstate highways and bridges, including their foundations; the upgrade of most interchanges to improve their function and safety; the addition of capacity along existing corridors, the construction of new routes and the conversion of some existing routes to Interstate standards; the modification of some urban segments to maintain connectivity while remediating economic and social disruption; and, further improvement of highway safety features.
- Annual investment in the Interstate Highway System should be increased by approximately two-and-a-half times, from its current level of \$23 billion in 2018 to \$57 billion annually over the next 20 years.
- The restoration of the nation's Interstate Highway System will require strong federal leadership and a robust federal-state partnership.

"It is important to note that the results of the TRIP Interstate Report do not indicate that our assets are "less safe," she said. "Poor-condition bridges are not unsafe, but they need significant repairs or replacement. If a bridge would ever be deemed unsafe, it is closed. Statewide highway fatalities reached a new low in 2019, dropping to 1,059, the lowest since record-keeping began in 1928 and 131 less than in 2018."

Campbell continued: "An investment in transportation is an investment in our communities, and PennDOT will continue to advocate for sustainable transportation funding at both the federal and state level."

Pennsylvania's roads and bridges didn't make the lists of states with the most congested urban interstates, the greatest increase in vehicle miles of travel since 2000, the greatest share of commercial trucks, or the highest interstate fatality rates.

But the commonwealth did make it on to the list of the following categories:



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Top 20 states and the percentage of its interstates that have poor pavement conditions

- Ohio — 3 percent
- Minnesota — 3 percent
- West Virginia — 3 percent
- Massachusetts — 3 percent
- Arkansas — 3 percent
- Oklahoma — 3 percent
- Pennsylvania — 4 percent
- Wisconsin — 4 percent
- New York — 5 percent
- Maryland — 5 percent
- Indiana — 6 percent
- California — 6 percent
- Colorado — 6 percent
- Washington — 6 percent
- Michigan — 7 percent
- Louisiana — 7 percent
- New Jersey — 8 percent
- Wyoming — 9 percent
- Delaware — 11 percent
- Hawaii — 19 percent

- Maine — 4 percent
- Washington — 4 percent
- Pennsylvania — 4 percent
- Idaho — 4 percent
- California — 4 percent
- Connecticut — 4 percent
- Colorado — 5 percent
- Michigan — 5 percent
- Missouri — 5 percent
- New York — 6 percent
- Alaska — 6 percent
- Massachusetts — 6 percent
- Illinois — 8 percent
- West Virginia — 14 percent
- Rhode Island — 17 percent



Multiple crashes on Interstate 81 cause traffic to come to a standstill east of Grantville, Pa., June 8, 2020. Mark Pynes | mpynes@pennlive.com

Data shows that motorists who travel via interstates are less likely to encounter fatal crashes or be involved in a fatal crash. States where lives were saved by interstates in 2018:

- Arizona — 113
- Alabama — 126
- Oregon — 148
- Missouri — 150
- Michigan — 153
- Indiana — 156
- North Carolina — 195
- Virginia — 199
- New York — 203
- Louisiana — 209
- Georgia — 211
- Kentucky — 212
- South Carolina — 248
- Tennessee — 265
- Illinois — 273
- Ohio — 276
- Pennsylvania — 298
- Texas — 299
- Florida — 304
- California — 563



The Central Susquehanna Valley Transportation project (CSVT) bridge across the West Branch of the Susquehanna River in Union Township, Union County. The 4,545-foot-long highway bridge will carry traffic over the Susquehanna River. October 2, 2019. Dan Gleiter | dgleiter@pennlive.com

States where bridges are 50 years old or older:

- Delaware — 58 percent
- New Mexico — 60 percent
- Indiana — 60 percent
- Pennsylvania — 60 percent
- North Dakota - 60 percent
- Kansas — 61 percent
- Mississippi — 61 percent
- California — 63 percent
- New Jersey — 63 percent
- Idaho — 65 percent
- Vermont — 65 percent
- New Hampshire — 65 percent
- Rhode Island — 66 percent
- Maine — 66 percent
- Ohio — 66 percent
- Arizona — 67 percent
- Oklahoma — 68 percent
- Massachusetts — 73 percent
- Connecticut — 74 percent
- Wyoming — 76 percent



The Central Susquehanna Valley Transportation project (CSVT) bridge across the West Branch of the Susquehanna River in Union Township, Union County. The 4,545-foot-long highway bridge will carry traffic over the Susquehanna River. October 2, 2019. Dan Gleiter | dgleiter@pennlive.com

There are 57,741 bridges on the U.S. Interstate system, according to the report. Three percent are rated in poor/structurally deficient conditions; 56 percent are rated in fair condition. The Federal Highway Association defines a poor/structurally deficient bridge as one that requires immediate rehabilitation to remain open, and is restricted to carrying lighter-weight vehicles, or is closed.

One quarter — about 27 percent — of interstate bridges are in need of repair or replacement, the U.S. Department of Transportation reported.

Top 20 states where interstate bridges are poor or structurally deficient:

- New Jersey — 3 percent
- North Carolina — 3 percent
- Louisiana — 3 percent
- Montana — 4 percent
- South Carolina — 4 percent