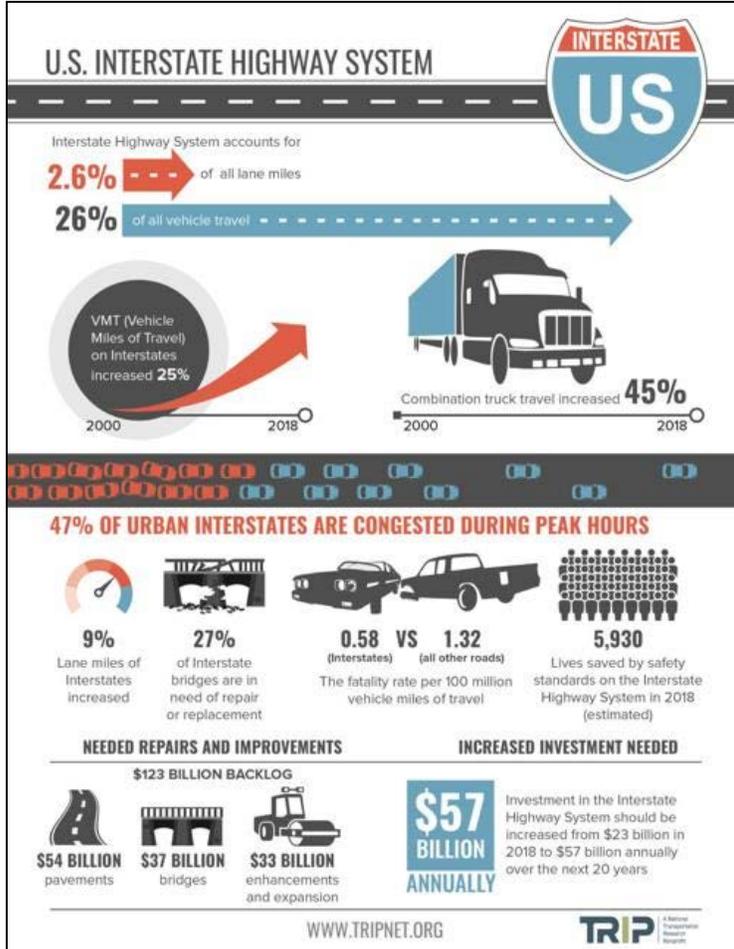


# S.C. interstates have backlog of problems

Special to The T&D | Saturday, July 18, 2020



WASHINGTON – 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 today 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, 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.

According to the TRB report, the U.S. interstate 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. The TRB report concludes that annual investment in the Interstate Highway System should be increased approximately 2-1/2 times, from \$23 billion in 2018 to \$57 billion annually over the next 20 years.

The design of the interstate -- which includes a separation from other roads and rail lines, a minimum of four lanes, paved shoulders and median barriers -- makes South Carolina's interstates more than 2-1/2 times as safe to travel on as all other roadways. The fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel on South Carolina's interstates in 2018 was 0.87 -- the sixth highest in the U.S. -- compared to 2.20 on the state's non-Interstate routes. TRIP estimates that additional safety features on South Carolina's Interstate Highway System saved 248 lives in 2018.

The TRIP report found that since 2000, travel on the U.S. interstate system -- the importance of which has been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic -- has increased at a rate nearly triple that at

which new lane capacity is being added.

In South Carolina, 49% of urban interstate highways are considered congested during peak hours, the 18th greatest share in the U.S. vehicle travel on South Carolina's interstates increased 35% from 2000 to 2018, the 12th fastest rate in the nation. Nine percent of interstate travel in South Carolina is by combination trucks.

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. Four percent of South Carolina's interstate bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition, the 15th highest share in the U.S. Nine percent of South Carolina's interstate bridges are in need of repair or replacement.

According to the TRIP report, pavements on 1% of South Carolina's interstate highways are in poor condition.

Restoring and upgrading the Interstate Highway System to meet the nation's 21st century transportation needs will require strong federal leadership and a robust federal-state partnership to re-establish the Interstate Highway System as the nation's premier transportation network. The current federal surface transportation program, "Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST Act)," the primary source of Interstate highway funding, expires on Sept. 30, 2020, and the reauthorization of a new long-term, adequately and reliably funded long-term federal program will be needed to ensure that a strong federal program supports the restoration of the interstate system.

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% -- 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 corridors; and, modifying some urban segments to maintain connectivity while remediating economic and social disruption.