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EDITORIAL

Gridlock

More people plus additional vehicles equals heavier traffic.

That simple equation holds true on city streets, two-lane state routes and major highways.

In Maryland, the rate of congestion, travel volume and pavement deterioration on its interstates were found to be among the highest in the nation. A new report released by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit founded in 1971, examined overall use of the roadways and the shape they're in.

Like many reviews, it contains an abundance of information and a correspondingly long title — "Restoring Maryland's Interstate Highway System: Meeting Maryland's Transportation Needs with a Reliable, Safe & Well-Maintained National Highway Network." The organization's work was completed before the COVID-19 global pandemic crimped travel across the country and around the world.

The Free State earned a double dubious distinction. TRIP's research revealed that from 2000 to 2018, vehicle travel on Maryland's interstates increased at a rate nine times faster than the rate at which new lane capacity was added, making them the second busiest and the second most congested in the U.S.

The heavy traffic flow also increased deterioration of the routes, with the share of interstate pavement in poor condition in Maryland ranked as the 11th highest in the nation. Still, travel on the interstates was determined to be more than twice as safe as travel on all other roads, the group determined.

The results came as no surprise to Greg Slater, the Maryland Department of Transportation secretary. "TRIP's report demonstrates what we've known for quite some time: Maryland has real congestion and mobility challenges. The Maryland Department of Transportation is approaching these challenges through a mix of congestion-reducing projects and programs across our systems," he said at a virtual news conference. He pointed out money

lost because of delays and emphasized the need for improvement.

While the interstate highway system accounts for only 4% of roadway lane miles, it carries 30% of the state's vehicle travel, according to the report. TRIP identified the busiest segments, including two sections of I-270, two sections of I-495 and a portion of I-95/I-495. We can attest to that.

The examination concluded that 6% of pavements are in mediocre condition, 8% are in fair shape and the remaining 80% are good. But as the aging nationwide system continues to break down, most interstate highways, bridges and interchanges will need to be rebuilt or replaced.

The ability of states to invest in repairs and improvements will be limited by the huge drop in travel inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is estimated to reduce state transportation revenues by approximately \$16 billion in 2020 and by \$37 billion over five years.

Both Slater and Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP, said federal funding through congressional action is paramount.

"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."

Few can argue that infrastructure is an important measure of a nation's status. A sound transportation system that allows people and goods to move freely will keep America great.